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BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL.

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A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"NELLIE'S MEMORIES," AND "WEE WIFIE."

"Sing of the nature of Woman, and then the song shall be surely full of variety, old crotchets, and most sweet closes. It shall be humorous, grave, fantastic, amorous, melancholy, sprightly, one in all, and all in one." —MARSTON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL.

CHAPTER I.

THE WARP AND THE WOOF.

"Weakness to be wroth with weakness! woman's pleasure, woman's pain—
Nature made them blinder motions bounded in a shallower brain:

Woman is the lesser man, and all thy passions, match'd with mine,
Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine."

Tennyson's Locksley Hall.

And here I must linger a moment.

There are pauses in life, why not in fiction?

If you have come with me so far, have patience while I take breath a little; here are ascents, fresh difficulties, new complications, a stmubling block or two; we should sit down a while to collect our forces, and then forward to the end.

It has seemed to me as though, in this narrative, I have been as one who has loitered along a sunny high-road, where there are trees and hedgerows, and

plenty of pleasant shade; there is a broad low level everywhere, there are bye-ways, soft glades, trickles of water out of hidden runlets, here and there a grating pebble, a little rough place perhaps, and thorns and flowers everywhere.

We have been gathering flowers—a briar rose or two, honeysuckle, a spray of eglantine, now a tall foxglove or a scarlet poppy, by-and-by there will be trails of blue convolvuli, tied all together with green ears of corn; the flowers are homely, the colors not well blended, some are already withering; a poor thing after all, a hedgerow nosegay, a few bright-colored weeds, but my own. I have gathered them with pain and trouble, they are dear to me. The sun has been very bright, there has been a play of shadows, now it is a little overcast, there is a ground mist rising, the road grows rugged, it is broken up, sterile, a little barren; here is a steep ascent, rough hewn stones, more and more difficulties. The mountain tops are still gilded with sunshine, we shall have a fine evening, you say; let us throw away our flowers, they are full of thorns, as you see, and now let us pick our way among those granite boulders, and so on to that steep defile which looks so dark and dolorous in the distance; there are stumbling blocks, but you must trust me a little. I think I can promise that every step shall lead us nearer the end.

' If you have journeyed with me so far—ah, and are you not tired of your companion?—you will know how dear Barbara is to me; do you wonder at it, do you find fault with her, does she weary you? That is because you do not know her as I do. To you she may be only a fictitious shadow, among other shadows; to me she is living, she is reality. If I have created her, I do not know it; she may be but a little bright-colored weed that I have gathered by the roadside, and warmed in my bosom—a poor thing, but my own, my very own.

And so I have taken her into my heart. She is so faulty you say—ah, but so lovable; she is uncertain, as full of fancies as a nut of meat; discontented—well, so she is; ungrateful and apt to fight with shadows, but then she is Barbara; she is not specially lamb-like, not one of your soft impressionable women, not even beautiful—I think I rejoice at that; but as I have called her before, my healthy moorland breeze, sweet as wholesome, and strong as sweet, and cheering as new wine.

And two men had found out the briar rose, and loved her, prickles and all; one has stooped to pluck her, and withdrawn his hand sorely wounded, and the other—well, what will you? two cannot wear her, and she loves whom she loves—hence the complication.

Two men, both generous, one strong, and Barbara brimming over with truth, and all the dull

tide of circumstance setting dead against her, and she as true as the needle to its magnet, and invisible hands parting them.

At odds, ah, miserably at odds.

And the how, and the wherefore, and the pros and the cons, we have yet to learn, and if one whom you respect does wrong or wanders from the level way, misguided, do not blame me, for the passions blind men, and we are all human, and even the most erect gets a fall sometimes.

But Nigel, I am full of pity for him.

He was not very strong, neither physically nor morally, but he had all the makings of a good man about him. Life had been rather against him; with a sensitive temperament, almost feminine in its delicate organisation, and keenly alive to all forms of sufferings, he had had to struggle through some of his best years with the burden of a sickly body and irritable nerves, which he had borne with every conceivable impatience, and all the rebellion of a haughty spirit.

All his resources were in his art, and in intercourse with kindred minds; he became cynical, fastidious, and sentimental in a breath; he commenced pictures, philosophised, and tried to blend the stoic and epicurean together, and failing that, he indulged himself in the two love dreams of his life, from which he awoke soured in mind and heart, to

find that mere beauty could not content him, and with the chivalrous desire strong upon him to wage war with womankind ever after.

This feeling was strong upon him when Barbara met him; he had thought her a child, and treated her brusquely; afterwards he found he could not forget her, through the restless night that followed his accident, he could not get her out of his head, she haunted his dreams; by-and-by he found the little Samaritan was the central figure in his life picture.

He had sketched her over and over again as she had first appeared to him, sketches full of strong nervous power, and had hidden them away in his secret drawers; he would never forget that evening —never!

The setting sun, the dark line of firs, the young bracken, the horrible sick pain, the loneliness, the terror of the starting blood; then the little demure figure in grey, with low ripples of brown hair half hiding her forehead, and great startled eyes; the timid womanly advances, the childlike awkwardness, the frightened sweetness of her voice, and the softness of the little hands that guided him: she had made him lean on her shoulder, and he had looked down on her, his small slender prop, and wondered as he did so whether she were some little Sister of the Poor, a stray novice perhaps, new to her duties, so

very sober was her garb and look, and when he found out his mistake, the quaintness of her aspect amused him, and after that there was nothing but faintness and pain. But he hankered after her strangely in his illness, though he chose to be a little difficult, and remain upstairs long after his due time; he began to listen for her footsteps, the only loud ones about the house; he knew the decided little tapping of her heels along the passages, as well as he knew the sweep and "silking" of his mother's dress; he would brighten up and smile at her clear whistling, or the chirruping voice in which she called "Ben." Often he watched her playing odd pranks with him in the garden, trying to make him perform a *valse à deux temps* with her, on his hind legs, much to Ben's disgust; he would move his legs stiffly round about a few times, nibbling and licking his bushy paws all the time like a bear, and then he would feign a growl, and refuse to stir, and Barbara would finish her dance *à la Dervise*, getting faster and faster; and then there would be hide and seek between the trees, and touch last, and all manner of childish games; and then all at once she would come down the lawn, her quicksilver gone, walking quietly with her hands behind her, and her face as grave as a judge. She did not look pretty then, she had a way of puckering up her forehead, and drawing down the corners of her mouth, and her

hair looked too heavy for her head, and was often rough and unkempt; then Nigel would note all her defects with his fastidious eye; "there is no need for Samaritans to be handsome, I suppose," he would say; "this Samaritan of mine is the greatest oddity I have ever seen!" but he was always disappointed, notwithstanding, when the oddity went in.

And then he came downstairs and saw her in one of her sunny moods, in the midst of flowers and sunshine, making up a very pretty color picture—when she sat and chirped at him like a little bird, and then he began to take interest in her in earnest, all the more that he found her freshness did not pall upon him, and that her originality was striking. By-and-by he discovered that Barbara had the happy knack of charming away his fretful humors—that she gave him his way, and had her own at the same time; if she were cross to others, she was never so to him, and that pleased his masculine vanity; he was never dull, never ennuyé when she was by. Hester's beauty was ponderous, her gentleness inane, after Barbara; this little fresh piece of life was to him the most charming compound of frankness and innocence, eked out with perfect honesty, that he had ever seen; presently, because she was the soul of truth and never disappointed him, he grew to love her.

She had been his pupil for some time then, and

they had been thrown into daily, hourly intercourse, and you know how dangerous that is to a man so susceptible as Nigel; from the couch, where he had ruled and tyrannised over the women folk of Dr. Heathcote's household, he suddenly held out the sceptre of his power to this small insignificant Barbara—this Barbara so humble in her own estimation that she had prejudged herself that she should find favor in no man's eyes—and lo, this lordly young Ahasuerus, beautiful with a man's beauty, had stooped to her and loved her with his whole heart. "You are just the dearest thing in the world to me," he had said to her in that generous offer of his, and how had the full knowledge of that fact stunned her!

Well, it was strange—but, dear friends, how often am I to repeat that life is strange and full of the oddest contradictions,—life, not only fiction, remember.

Which are the women whom you know in your daily walk to be the best loved by men, and who exercise over them the greatest influence? Is it the ball-room belle, the reigning beauty of the season, the fair-haired idol of a crowd?—you know it is not. There was an old saying, I remember, in my childhood, "Tall women are admired, and little ones beloved;" there was a homely truth disguised there amid much quaintness; if I were to improvise

another I could often say with real honesty, "that handsome women are admired and plain ones beloved," for one sees it over and over again.

Why do so many happy matches seem such terrible misfits in the eyes of the world? "What could have made him choose her? How could he have thrown himself away upon that woman?"—how often we hear that said with the shrug and elevated eyebrow of polite incredulity. How often!—why, have we not said it ourselves?

I remember, some time ago, hearing a great deal about one who seemed to exercise unlimited fascination over the men by whom she was surrounded; she was a consummate flirt, but a good woman too, and she won certainly the most devoted love.

When I saw her, I could not conceal my astonishment. I saw before me a woman not even young, plain, without the slightest claims to good looks, or a single feature that could entitle her to admiration; it was a face that would hardly have been noticed in a room, and her manners were singular, prononcé, almost affected, and yet I knew of a certainty how many had found her fascinating; what an enigma, I thought; and yet, are there not often such enigmas to be found?

And so it was with Nigel and Barbara; it was less to be surprised at that Dr. Strath should love

her, seeing that he was not given to lay much stress on personal beauty, but that Nigel, with his fastidious tastes, his artist's eye, should fix on this insignificant girl, should pour out upon her all the wealth of his passionate love, only to be repulsed, was a thing indeed to excite wonder. Was his clear sight deceived, were Barbara's faults beauties in his eyes, could he overlook her want of style, her lack of dignity, that he should take her into his heart of hearts, that he should love her as he never loved fair-haired Gretchen, or Maria, as he would never love any other woman till the hour of his death?

I don't know—how can I? I can only say that such was the fact. And now that he had been so rejected, would he give her up? Ah, you do not know Nigel Strath.

This love was driving him mad with the desire of possession, he had never known rest or comfort since he had found out what she was to him—it was wearing him terribly, health and spirits alike; he had wooed her in every way that he could, but she was not to be won; she had laughed away his honest speeches, his open professions of love had fallen meaninglessly on her ear—either she would not, or she could not attach sober truth to them; she had grown into shy startled ways with him—in her trouble she had held herself completely aloof from his sympathy; and now when galled by her seeming

indifference, and unable to bear any longer the suspense and misery of his love, he had dared his all on the single throw of the lover, she had shrunk away from him with such undisguised pain and terror, with such honest negatives on her lips, and such sorrowful firmness in every line of her face, as to suggest no hope to him, no single chance of success.

She did not love him, he saw that clearly, but would he give her up for that? Never! As is the case with some impulsive natures, the very resistance to his wish added fuel to his flame, and even while borne down by despair and sharp physical pain he yet registered a sort of vow in his heart that, willingly or unwillingly, she should be his. "I will move heaven and earth to win you," he had said to her, and his words had filled her with a chill presentiment of some coming trouble. "And one day I will win you, Barbara," and then as she left him he called out after her yet more loudly, "my Barbara."

She had never feared him before as she did then, as she went through the lanes stunned and trembling and almost sobbing with pain; she recalled, with a feeling akin to terror, the hungry brilliant eyes, the thin face, the lips blue with some internal agony, the sharp passion of his voice as he pleaded with her, the almost unearthly beauty of his whole

face, and as she remembered it her trouble was very great—all the more that she had grown to love him with the same tender, gay, and half-protecting love which she felt for Leigh. But Leigh had deceived her fond idolatry—and St. Ronans was become her lover and frightened her—and so there was no rest for Barbara till that sudden light broke upon her and showed her the truth writ up in dazzling letters of gold, and after that she forgot her trouble and was no more afraid, and though she would mourn for her poor St. Ronans with the constancy of a faithful heart, yet for the time being her joy was very great when she first woke to her full life, and basked in the sunshine of her love.

And that night, when Barbara repeated her prayers, she said "Thank God for the truth," and once again, "poor, poor St. Ronans," and then she slept the happy sleep of youth. And so Barbara took her first sip of the chalice of life. By-and-by she may say the draught is bitter as she drinks deeper, but I do not think she will ever quite forget the sweetness of that first taste.

But what has become of Dr. Strath all this time?

I feel a few words are necessary to redeem him from any charge of inconsistency or undue procrastination; he has been walking, all these years, in a steep uphill road of his own devising, and not being gifted with second sight, or able to prognosticate an

ominous future, he has tried no short cuts to the goal of his desire—preferring to work on patiently, doing the duty that lay before him, and trusting almost with childlike faith for what the coming time might yield him.

Seldom was such stern integrity and such rigid self-denial to be seen in a man so young as Norman Strath.

Not that his youth was very apparent either to himself and others, and few would have believed that Dr. Strath had in reality only attained his thirtieth year, but hardship and mental labor had told their tale on him, and a toilsome youth had settled down into premature middle-age.

How he had struggled and worked no one but himself knew, any more than they did how he had washed his hands in innocency, and kept the thing that was right from his youth; few men if they had had to write out the account of their past life, their young life, would have written out such a pure record as Norman Strath's, albeit he was mixed up so early with the world of school and the world of life, cast upon the crowd as it were, as utterly friendless and forlorn as any lad could be who had but one human being belonging to him, and that his mother.

"He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow:" it was verily those words which I have

used before, that kept him from straying out of that narrow rugged track—the knowledge that he was her all, that she depended upon him, that in her loneliness she was thinking of and praying for him; and though, from the strange circumstances of his life, those circumstances which Mrs. Strath had so mournfully narrated to Barbara, she was more a stranger to him than most mothers are to their sons—yet he soon began to regard her with that chivalrous devotion with which young manhood must always endow some woman—and when they came together he already found himself disposed to love her with his whole heart.

Not that his love ever became demonstrative. Norman was never demonstrative to anyone, he was always a little reserved in his affections—apt to wax curt and hostile in a breath, even to those he liked best. His mother and he lived on the pleasantest and most amicable footing; he was loath to lose her presence even for a day, and submitted willingly to all her soft tyrannies for his comfort, and yet, though she never confessed it, she was often disappointed and chilled by his persistent reticence, and his want of freedom of speaking on all that concerned himself. It seemed as though, not even to his mother—that tender woman who shared his life, could he break down that barrier which hid his truer self; and so it had come

to pass that, upright and self-denying as he was, he was almost a stranger to the one who knew him best, and dearly as she loved him, this was a great grief to her.

Even concerning that morbid remorse of his about his cousin, she knew little or nothing. I think if he had ever got his pain into words, and told her, her shrewd matter-of-fact sense would have proved to him his error; the whole thing was so dim and shadowy that the very bringing it forth into the light of day would have caused it to wither and dwarf to its true dimensions; he would have absolved himself from his boyish vow, he would have learnt to smile at it long ago, but now the very mystery and darkness in which he kept it had fostered the evil thing—it was a monster of his own devising—one day it might master him. It was the one plague-spot in his otherwise healthy vitality —his strong, rigid nature had conceived the unwholesome idea, and it engendered a form of morbid suffering that was surprising. He was beginning to think his proud denial was mistaken, and that he had wittingly and knowingly given that fatal push. I am rather of opinion that this was the truth, that it was the unconscious temptation of a moment, of which he was scarcely sensible himself. But whether or not that was the case, still he stood self-convicted of anger and fierce wrestling, and the

tyranny of the strong over the weak, and the author of all the untoward circumstances that led to that unlucky accident, which brought out all the inherent delicacy of Nigel's constitution, and made him the restless, discontented being he really was.

Norman's clear sight read all the faults of Nigel's true nature, he owned he was haughty, captious and domineering, prone to much selfishness and exaggeration of feeling, but not the less did he love and yearn over him in his heart, and long to see him beloved and useful in his generation, and employing his great talents and opportunities to the good of his fellow creatures in a wider and deeper sense. He mourned sincerely over the indolence that was partly constitutional, and partly acquired; it seemed a grievous thing to him, to see a man of Nigel's culture spending the best years of his life in aimless travel, and still more aimless repose, neither working at his art nor ambitious of success, sheltering himself from any labor, however noble, on the plea of the hypochondriac, and only adding to his real disease by the uncurbed violence of his passions, and the diversity of his many fancies. And yet in spite of all, he knew him to be gentle at heart, and honest and generous to a fault; he could be magnanimous and rouse himself on occasions, and over and over again Norman had owned to himself that he had never known a man more truly lovable than

Nigel Strath; in other hands, and under other circumstances, if he were compelled to labor for his sustenance, for example, or to take care of one younger and weaker than himself, he could imagine him casting off the shell of old habits, and becoming a nobler and stronger man than he was ever likely now to become.

This restless discontent became a daily and hourly anxiety to Norman; he saw that some hidden trouble was wearing him, and he began to long for his happiness and restoration to health, and so he set himself seriously to task, to find out and minister to this mental disease as he called it. For he was as ignorant of the real cause as he could possibly be. And yet he loved Barbara, oh! how he loved her! He had had one or two fits of jealousy when Barbara accepted the necklace on her birthday for example, but they were merely temporary feelings of uneasiness, and passed away as soon as he brought them to the test of reason; naturally unsuspicious, he never really supposed he had any grave cause to fear a rival in Nigel. That he should want his Barbara, his plain, homely Barbara, would have seemed a thing incredible to him; and it was only some sudden presentiment, bred of his great love, perhaps, that drew from him those few words, "Be faithful to me, Barbara, little Barbara, be faithful to me." It was as though his passion broke

bounds for a moment, and he was compelled to speak, though only vaguely, and in a sense that might be mistaken. It seems strange that he had never betrayed himself all this time, that he had kept this sweet secret of his locked up in his own heart, so that not even the woman he loved guessed at it; but a hard life had taught Norman patience and prudence, and there was a reason for his reserve.

He was a very poor man when he came to Sunningford as the doctor's assistant, and there seemed little hope then that he would be able to maintain a wife for many a long year to come. To defray the cost of his education his mother had had to sell out part of her little annuity, and that, and the result of his poor earnings kept them very straitly for some time, and not even Barbara, who was most at Oakleigh Cottage, guessed the shifts to which their narrow means reduced them, or how hard it was to keep up the appearance that Sunningford demanded. By-and-by they got on better; Norman did literary work, they began to add to their comforts, then to save, then Norman, elated at the prospect of the small partnership soon to be offered him out of consideration of his professional talent, induced his mother to buy those shares of Dr. Heathcote, which were to enable him to pay his son's heavy college debts. Mrs. Strath, deeply reluctant and yet unable to refuse her son anything, drew out

the last of her annuity and placed it in his hands. Norman, intoxicated with the success of his speculation, which was already repaying him far beyond his wildest hopes, still insisted on maintaining their narrow way of life, and spent his professional earnings in buying fresh shares. Dr. Heathcote was doing the same, only more largely.

Norman had hopes now that his goal was in view, in a little while—a very little while—he thought he should be able to keep a wife with comfort—he was beginning to throw off his reserve with Barbara and show her somewhat of his heart; in his quiet undemonstrative way he was slowly but surely winning her; on the day before her birthday he had made up his mind to speak at once to Dr. Heathcote.

You know what happened; with the doctor's illness came a grave delay, by-and-by other clouds gathered on Norman's horizon; he was aware of them before, and had treated them lightly, presently he found out they were ominous enough.

A new doctor had appeared in Durnford, that was nothing particularly to be wondered at, other wandering doctors had come before, but had never stayed long, so great was the reliance of Durnford on Dr. Heathcote.

But this Mr. Murray had no sooner appeared than a clique formed round him, and two or three of Dr. Heathcote's oldest patients were to be found

among them; it did not surprise him, however, that old Mrs. Howden should pay court to the new comer, and accept meekly such pills and potions as he chose to send her, for Mrs. Howden was given to change her doctor on the slightest pretext; but that Mrs. Rupert, and the two Miss MacArthurs, who had modest lodgings over the baker's, and Grundel the butcher, who was quite an authority in the village,—that these should throw off their allegiance, and openly declare for the new doctor, was a perplexity even for Norman's astute mind, he could not understand it at all. It might have been revenge in Grundel's case, seeing that his dog had fared so badly in that encounter with Ben; he had looked very askance at Barbara and her dog ever after, but how about Mrs. Rupert and the Miss MacArthurs? Miss Kitty MacArthur was thought to have looked rather kindly on Dr. Strath, and had been overheard to say "that she had never seen a better favored man;" certain it was, Miss Kitty was always watering her flowers when he passed; behind the great pots of scarlet geranium or mignionette, there was always a white hand to be seen, and then the blond ringlets bobbing over Miss Kitty's high cheek bones. When Mrs. Baines' baby was ill, she used to waylay him in the shop, sidling up between the trays of hot crusty loaves, full of anxiety to "know how the dear child was," and she

used to flutter her blue ribbons, and pucker up her features into forced curves and smiles, which ill became the strong-minded sensible face which was hers by right.

Mr. Murray was a widower, and was known to be looking out for a wife; he had a face and head rather like a hairdresser's block, and he was very tender in his inquiries after Miss Kitty; there was no watering of the flowers now when Norman passed, and only the stiffest of bows when he met her and her sister out walking: Kate Rupert too had a way of interposing her pink-lined parasol between her and the sun, which was sure to be shining on whichever side Norman passed; he used to note these things with a smile, by-and-by he became grave; a straw will sometimes show which way the wind is setting.

If only Dr. Heathcote could have shown his honest face the current must have been stemmed, so great and well-deserved was his popularity; but now he was laid by, and the mischief was progressing; Norman was no favorite in Durnford, he knew that well, or in Sunningford either; it was true the old women at the union adored him, and so did the almshouse people, though they were properly Dr. Heathcote's charge, but a few old women in blue checked dresses represent but a slight share of influence, and the almshouses were

a very small affair; with the rest of his poorer patients Norman was rather an object of dislike, he was too quick and decided, too intolerant of their dirt and pig-headedness, as he called it, he was apt to quarrel with them if they refused to adopt his new theories, he would come down upon them too heavily; Miss Vokes was bad enough, but Norman was worse, and so those of the Susan Moggs class regarded him with little favor, they would whine and cringe to him before his face, and speak badly of him behind his back, and all because he had not Dr. Heathcote's pleasant ways.

But if it were so with his poorer neighbours, it was worse with the village aristocracy—of which there was a fine descending scale, most subtle and mysterious to uninitiated eyes, beginning at Sir William Travers of Briarsley and ending at Mrs. Baines, the plump bakeress—is there such a word? with them he was decidedly unpopular, owing to his brusque ways and hatred of all humbug; he had very small sympathy with ladylike ailments, was apt to prescribe fresh air and early rising, when they hoped for tonics and much indulgence; he had a habit of telling them frankly there was nothing the matter with them, thereby causing loss to his own pocket; he had offended Lady Travers mortally by doing this; she was very wroth with Dr. Heathcote for sending her that rough young man to attend her,

and there were ominous mutterings in the servants' hall, that Dr. Strath would get his congé and that Mr. Murray would be sent for, if Dr. Heathcote were not soon about again.

It was this last report that made Norman look grave, knowing as he did that Lady Travers' influence was great in Durnford.

"Mother," he said one evening, as he came in hot and weary, and cast his hat down on the table; "I think it has come to this—that one of these days we shall have to decamp, bag and baggage, from Sunningford."

Mrs. Strath looked up startled; he was very tired, but there was no lack of courage, or even cheerfulness, in his voice; he seemed rather like a man who has to make up his mind suddenly to do an unpleasant thing, and is glad to get it over.

"Why, Norman, how you talk!"

"There'll be talk enough presently," he observed; "where is Fred Lisle's letter, mother, I want to read it again," and, as she passed it over to him, he sat down, and, spreading it out before him, studied it for a long time with an intent face; it was not Mrs. Strath's way ever to interrupt him, so she waited on patiently till he should speak.

He folded it up presently, with a thoughtful frown; and, tired as he was, commenced pacing from end to end of the little parlour; by-and-by,

as though he felt the narrowness of its limit, he threw the door open, and extended his walk into the hall, it would be the front garden directly, Mrs. Strath thought, and then she began to wax uneasy.

"Norman," she said, as he passed her chair, "will you not tell me what has happened?"

He stopped opposite her with a short laugh.

"I am thinking that you and I will have to start fair in the New World. Sunningford will soon be too hot to hold me;" he was about to resume his walk, but she caught him by the hand.

"Something has happened, I can see it in your face; why do you talk in riddles?" then he answered her.

"Lady Travers has sent for Murray—don't look so shocked, mother—do you see which way the wind blows now, there is not room for three such men as Dr. Heathcote, Murray, and my humble self, one of us must go; I am thinking, as I am growing decidedly unpopular, it must be I."

"You unpopular, Norman!"

He laughed mechanically.

"Yes I; I cannot 'minister to the feminine mind diseased' of Durnford, or make up love philtres and cosmetiques; seriously, mother, but for the old ladies at the union, my dear old folk of the almshouse, and Lady Hunsden, I don't think

I've a single friend at Durnford, and hardly at Sunningford.

"There's Hillyard, and Mr. Herbert, and——"

"Yes, I know, but they are all healthy folk, and bring no grist to the mill; no, when the doctor gets about again, he will find his practice sadly fallen off; that affair of Leigh's has lost him the Ruperts, I believe. They always meant Kate for him."

"But, Norman, who has done this mischief; who was it who set that report afloat in the village that you had lost more fever cases than you ought?"

Norman's brow grew dark—but he did not answer.

"My son, an enemy has done this," and Mrs. Strath spoke in great agitation.

"I have heard one thing to-day," said Norman, hesitating; that Murray is a protégé of Lady Strath, a distant relative of her deceased husband; I am afraid that there is little doubt that she induced him to settle here."

"I knew it—oh, Norman, how she hates you—she will ruin us."

"No, not ruin us, that is not in her power, thank God; but she finds us troublesome neighbours, mother, and will be glad to get rid of us."

"Why did she ever come here?" returned Mrs. Strath. "I suppose because Nigel took a fancy to St. Ronans, and insisted on coming. I know she has

tried to persuade him to move, or take a London house—she detests the place—but he will not hear of it, and now Nest is to settle here, there will be less chance than ever of getting him away."

"And so she finds she has made a mistake in coming here at all, I suppose," resumed Norman; "she thought she could gloss over her old dislike, but finds it difficult; well, I shall not be sorry to play into her hands for once."

"You would like to leave Sunningford?"

"No, not like it, exactly, but I will make a virtue of necessity—you see the whole thing lies in a nutshell—every day I am more convinced that there is no room for two such men as Dr. Heathcote and myself; the doctor has no business with a partner at all, an assistant would do; anyhow, I am not the man to play second fiddle in a village; when the doctor gets about again he will right his own practice, I hope; if I stay here, with all this disaffection against me, I shall only injure it further; there are evil reports spread about me in the village; I have the cold shoulder given me on all sides; if this goes on, Dr. Heathcote must part with me, or lose all his patients."

"Oh, Norman, what shall we do?" cried Mrs. Strath, with the tears in her eyes.

"Do; why, I'll tell you; we will wait till the doctor is in a fair way to do his own work, then

I'll sell out of the Spanish mines, realise a little capital, and start off with Fred Lisle to America, there's a famous opening there they say, and——"

"And I, Norman?"

"And you will follow me with—with——" he stammered, and broke into a smile.

"Do you think she will come?"

"Yes, I think she will, mother—there, we have talked enough for this evening, I am off to the pipe-room."

"Yes, but Norman, only one word, why don't you make sure of it, and ask her?"

"Well, so I will; invite her here to-morrow, mother, and I will put it to the proof; there, good-night," and then he went.

CHAPTER II.

LADY STRATH'S REVENGE.

"*Lopez.* Methinks a woman dare not——
Rodrigo. Thou speakest poorly;
What dares not woman when she is provoked?
Or what seems dangerous to love or fury?"

Fletcher.

"Whose warp'd look proclaim
What store her heart is made of."

Shakespeare.

MRS. STRATH had said "an enemy has done this," could she have seen her now would she have pitied her? Lady Strath had had a blow.

Other mothers had had similar blows, but this was so unexpected. Lady Strath did not tear her hair, such tearing of hair and rending of garments not being nineteenth-century customs; she could not cover her comely head with ashes, but she wore her sackcloth inwardly, and her bread was for a long time very bitter to her. She had been a good mother, she had done her duty to him; how had she deserved what had come upon her? So much, with many wringings of the hand, did she get out,

but in reality the news stunned her. She could not bring herself to believe that anything so humiliating, so altogether repugnant, should happen to her; had she brought him into the world that he should grieve her like this?

Let us see to what these vague sentences refer. Lady Strath is no favorite of mine, but it is necessary to go a little way with her, that we may understand the workings of much that followed.

Lady Strath, returning from her pleasant two days' shopping in London, is met on the threshold by news that her son is worse, a message by-the-bye by no means uncommon, as he was given to issue such bulletins when ennuyé or in ill-humor. His mother had left him by his own desire, but notwithstanding, he might have taken umbrage at her prolonged absence. Lady Strath, therefore, did not look much alarmed, she only questioned the servants in her usual placid manner; whom had they sent for—Murray or Dr. Strath? was he alone now? did he want her? and so on. The answers were not satisfactory; he would have no one near him; he had forbidden them peremptorily to send for any doctor, and he was continually asking at what hour his mother was due.

"Nest, your brother is not so well, I must go to him at once. Mrs. Griffiths must see after our refreshments presently," so saying, and drawing her

lace shawl closer round her, Mrs. Strath nodded cheerfully to her daughter, and went upstairs; she was well used to these querulous summons to Nigel's room, and weary and dusty as she was, she did not keep him waiting a moment.

"Well, Nigel," she said, brightly, as she turned the handle of the door; "here is your old mother back to plague you," but as she came up closer, her cheerful smile died away, he was certainly more ill than she had imagined.

"What have they been doing with you, dear?" she said, in alarm, as she stooped to kiss him; "why did they not telegraph for me, it was very wrong to keep me in such ignorance, Nigel: we must send for Robert Murray at once," and her hand was on the bell-rope, but he called her back.

"Come here, mother. I will not have Murray, I tell you, I will have no doctor at all."

"No doctor, Nigel?"

"No, none; what can they do for me?" he panted.

"You have your old pain again, I can see it, Nigel; at least let me send for Norman, he gave you great relief last time," but he stopped her again, detaining her with his feverish hand, and speaking fast and loud.

"I will have no one, no one I say; what is the old pain compared to the new? it is tearing me to pieces."

Sit down, mother, I want to talk to you; no, not there, nearer to me, where I can see and touch you. You and I must have a long talk, mother."

The vehemence of his tone, the excitement of his whole manner, filled her with dismay, but she was given to obey him; in his many illnesses he had always ruled her with a rod of iron. Some women love to be so ruled, Lady Strath was one of these. She sat down beside him now, and tired as she was, and sorely in need of refreshment, prepared herself to listen.

Looking at her now one could understand Nigel's fondness for her, in her soft maternal moods she was very pleasant to look at. There was something restful in her fresh middle-aged beauty as there was in the sober harmony of her dress, from the folds of her silver grey silk and the lace draperies of her shawl to the white unfurrowed forehead and smooth bands of glossy brown hair, there was no unfit crease or wrinkle, nothing to mar comeliness, a calm fair gentlewoman with tender motherly ways and looks. No wonder Nigel was proud of her. She was hiding her anxiety now under a placid smile; she saw that something had happened, that he had that to tell her that might be painful in the hearing; but nevertheless there was no lack of composure in the way she seated herself beside him.

"Well, Nigel, what have you to tell me?" she

said, turning her quiet face to him, and then she sat folding her hands upon her lap and waiting for him to speak.

But his next words undid all her calmness.

"Mother, I will have Barbara, I love her and she must be my wife!"

He shot out his sentences like a three-fold bolt, their cruel abruptness nearly took her breath away; she put up her hand as though she must ward off a visible blow.

"Barbara! What Barbara, Nigel?"

"Barbara Heathcote, my pupil, the only girl I have ever really loved, the girl whom before heaven and earth I mean to make my wife."

"Nigel, Nigel!" she drew a long breath as though he had hurt her, and the hurt were deadly.

"Why do you look at me like that, mother? What is it to you whom I marry? I will have Barbara and no other."

"You say this to me, Nigel? You dare to say this to me?"

"Why should I not dare? May not a man choose his own wife? I have chosen Barbara."

"Nigel, you will break my heart," and she really looked as though he were doing it, all her fresh color had died away; she was old and haggard and wan in a moment, years would not have aged her so, but not for that did she bring herself to believe it.

"Nigel, you will break my heart; say that you do not mean this thing."

"I am more in earnest than I can tell you, mother; you need only look at me to be assured of that."

"You love this girl? No, I will not believe it."

"Why should I not love her? When it comes to that, a man may love whom he chooses, I suppose."

"Yes, a man; but you, Nigel—ah, no, impossible. I am your own mother, but I tell you frankly, I do not believe you; it is a fancy, ridiculous, preposterous, if you will, but don't be disheartened, you will get over it. You have done wisely to tell me; a little time and absence will work wonders."

In his intense surprise he lay and looked at her.

"Leave it all to me," she continued, hurriedly; "it is not the first time I have helped you out of a similar scrape. Do you remember Maria? ah, and we had trouble with Gretchen, too. I begin to think girls the burdens of my life; it is not all sons that would entrust their mothers with their love affairs, but we have always been such friends. I suppose the girl's ugliness has bewitched you—who is it that calls ugliness fascinating? some French writer, I know. Ah, well, there's no accounting for tastes. If you must have got up a flirtation in this

dull place, why did you not choose Hester? Hester s passable looking,—but Barbara!"

"Have you quite finished, mother?"

"Wait a minute, Nigel; if I am to help you in this absurd affair, I must know exactly what has passed between you. Of course you have not let the girl know your feelings?—"

Nigel lay still with a curling lip.

"Do you mean that you have, that she has entrapped you into any declaration of love? you have been very imprudent; we shall have to make it right with the Doctor, we shall indeed."

"I am waiting till you have quite done, mother."

"It was very wrong," she went on. "I know it is hard for you, being shut up in this dead-and-alive place, it is enough to make a man commit any folly just to pass the time away; but it is dangerous pastime, meddling with a girl's heart; she may take it seriously, you know, Nigel, and there's no knowing what fuss may come of it." A dark look on his face warned her that she was trying his patience too far. "Well, never mind," she finished, "it is a very tiresome affair, very; we must spare the girl's feelings as much as we can, and I will promise you to make it right with the Doctor."

"Have you said your say, mother?" and his sneer was not pleasant to see.

"Yes," she returned more quietly, taking his hand, but he withdrew it, muttering something that she did not hear. Her temporary alarm was over, she had talked herself into the belief that he had entangled himself in a foolish flirtation, a snare into which he was very prone to fall; it was decidedly odd, that he should choose Barbara as a fit subject for his soft nothings, but the girl was clever, certainly, and had talked him into it; she never had approved of those lessons, never, and there should be no more of them, she determined—a piece of reasoning in which Barbara would have entirely coincided, could she have known it; she had no pity for the little vixen, as in her charity she called her; she had always thought her forward and presuming, and that she should try to attract her son, was a crime so heinous in a mother's catalogue, that it was never likely to be forgiven; "an impertinent, talkative little creature," as Lady Strath mentally anathematised her, while Nigel, frowning as darkly as he knew how, thought how he could best convince his mother of its being sober earnest.

"Have you ever doubted my word yet?" he asked at last angrily.

"No, never," she answered readily.

"Then why do you doubt it now? Look here, mother: we have been very good friends hitherto, I have never hidden anything from you, and I hope I

never shall, but it will be all over between us if you refuse to help me in this."

"Did I not say I would help you?" she returned softly.

"Yes, but what sort of help? I suppose you don't wish to drive me wild, but you are about as near doing it as you can possibly be. I declare before heaven, that if you refuse to believe my word any longer I will never speak to you again on this subject, and then there will be an end of all confidence between us."

"Nigel, do you forget I am your mother?"

"No, I do not forget it," he returned vehemently, "but I have never found you wanting in sympathy and love to me before; what has come to you mother, why will you not understand this thing that I say?"

"What is it you wish me to understand, Nigel?" she asked humbly. Though she was his mother, he ruled her with a rod of iron; "you surely do not wish to break my heart; you do not mean to tell me that you seriously love this Barbara; do not tell me that, Nigel, I could not bear it."

"You must learn to bear the truth, I suppose," he answered harshly."

"You love her—you—you—Nigel?"

"Ah, do I not? See here, mother,—she sat where you sat, was it days or was it hours ago, and "

I stood there and held out my hand as it might be thus, and asked her to be my wife."

"You asked her!" almost shrieked Lady Strath.

"Yes, I asked her; I don't look like one to be refused, do I?" he said proudly. "I wonder how many would say me nay as she did; she would not have me, she shrank away as though my touch scorched her: there was genuine terror in her look and voice, 'not yours, thank God,' I heard her say, and then she left me."

"Impossible!" ejaculated his mother, but there was relief in her tone.

"Does it not seem impossible? I, Nigel Strath, but no, I was not mistaken?" the haughtiness of his manner relaxed, and then changed to deep despondency, "she does not love me, she never will;" and then, in great agitation, "Mother if you do not get her for me, I shall die," and such a pallor overspread his face as he spoke as to excite her alarm.

"Calm yourself, Nigel; you are making yourself ill. What is there in this girl that you should be rendered so wretched? rouse yourself, be reasonable. She does not love you, you say; that very fact ought to cure your mad passion."

"It only adds fuel to the flame," he returned; "no no, willing or unwilling, I have sworn she shall be my wife; if she were like anyone else, such woo-

ing would have served to win her, but being what she is, I love her a thousandfold more."

Poor Nigel, he had called himself a man, but there was very little of the real manhood in him after all, I mean the real English manhood, of which Norman was so striking a type. The reticence and shy reluctance with which Dr. Strath spoke his feelings were quite unknown to Nigel, he had no notion of keeping his thoughts to himself and living his life silently; perhaps the fact that there was Southern blood in his veins might offer some excuse for his vehemence and warmth of expression. His mother, despite her fairness, was a quadroon by birth, though Nigel had only lately become aware that such was the case; and though his father had been English, yet Nigel had received a foreign education, and imbibed foreign tastes and prejudices; circumstances had still farther developed the warm Southern temperament, passionate, voluptuous, inert, which he had inherited from his mother, so that at all times his vivacity and exuberance of imagination were at striking variance with an Englishman's taciturnity; added to which, his weak health, and predisposition to indolence, made him at all times appear more boyish than he really was.

So it was that not even the sacredness of love was kept silently to himself, but with the ill-humor of a thwarted child, really suffering, and impatient, and

intolerant of the pain, he turned himself to his old adviser and friend, and fretted and chafed after her sympathy and help, in a way that would have excited genuine astonishment in Dr. Strath's mind, could he have heard him, and so it was that he got ready that rod of iron with which he meant to sway her to his behests.

You see it was the nature of the man to feel deeply and speak openly; his pain was unendurable, his passions undisciplined, his health precarious. Such men are torments to themselves and those with whom they live; they cannot command respect like the Dr. Straths of society, but when do they fail to win love? I confess to you that I find Nigel Strath eminently loveable; his beauty, such beauty as men have, was excessive, he was honorable and generous to a fault; and though he was not strong, he could not have stooped to a mean action, and no one knew this better than Barbara.

But there was one thing inflexible about him, and that was his will, and looking at him in that light, no one could call him specially weak; he had not Leigh's weakness, for example, but then he had not Dr. Strath's strength; but his will was enough to bring him into trouble, it would not bend for man, woman, or child; when he had a fixed idea or plan, which was not often, it was, putting circumstances aside, unalterable; he would never

change, he called that being firm; he had a great notion of his own force of character. Barbara recognised this obstinate tenacity of purpose in spite of his few words, and trembled. Lady Strath felt it too, for she wrung her hands in despair as she listened to him.

"She has no beauty," she said, striking out that everlasting feminine chord; after all, reader, do men or women, do you suppose, think most of the outward appearance? "she has no beauty, she has cast a glamor over you, she has positively not a single good feature."

"Perhaps you are right, mother!"

"She is plain, and little, and insignificant-looking," she continued, warming with her subject; "she cannot walk gracefully, she does nothing well that a woman should do well; not a single accomplishment, except that endless drawing. Nest, in spite of her deformity, and pale face, poor child, is infinitely more attractive and lady-like; what is there in her, what can there be in her, that you should wish to make her your wife?"

"She is Barbara Heathcote," repeated Nigel softly.

"Yes, she is Barbara Heathcote. Oh that we had never come to this place, never seen her, that it were Hester, even, or that foolish Connie—anyone but this Barbara. Nigel, I declare to you that

I have always disliked the girl, I have had an aversion to her, now I positively hate her."

It was a Parthian arrow flung in a losing battle; but it struck him.

"You will hate my wife, mother; ah, then, indeed it will never be right between you and me, we shall no longer be friends," and as he spoke, his face grew hard and cold to her, as it had never done yet.

Then she flung herself upon him weeping.

"Oh, you will not be so cruel to me,—how can you speak so to your mother?" but he put her from him, not violently, but with an ominous white look that she understood through her tears.

"It is not I who have made this breach, I have acted honestly; I have confided my trouble to you, but you have cast it off from you; you are treating me as though you were my step-mother—" his voice was very mournful. "I did not think it of you, mother."

The rod of iron was well over her now; in all their contests when had she ever gained the victory? had she not always been forced to submit as she did now?

"There must be an end of our confidence," he said again.

"Nigel, you are breaking my heart; what am I to do?" she was yielding now in very trouble. But he was inexorable.

"You must get me Barbara for my wife!"

"I! what are you thinking of? no I cannot help you there; I will withdraw my opposition, if you will, and leave you free to act; nay, I will speak no evil of the girl, and try, if I can, to think well of her, but it is the bitterest pill I shall ever have swallowed in my life."

"You must do more than that, mother; you must help me."

"How can I help you?" she said rather feebly; "mothers do not generally choose wives for their sons;" in saying which Lady Strath unconsciously lied, for had she not in her mind that very moment the girl whom she had hoped above all others that he would marry, and did he not know that she had so hoped; it was all over now with Clare Travers; however, she might turn her bright face elsewhere, for the young master of St. Ronans saw no beauty in her; "how can I help you?" she reiterated fretfully; "if you cannot woo this girl for yourself, can I do it for you?"

That turned him sullen in a moment.

"Well, well," he interrupted impatiently, "I see we shall never understand each other; say at once that you have no mind to help me in the matter, and let us have done with it. I see I have asked you too much; there, I have got my old pain again; talking has made it worse, never mind, I have only

a few short years to look forward to; a man can do without happiness, I suppose, if he has not long to live."

That was his master-stroke, a selfish and cruel one, if you will. Now indeed, the iron entered into her soul, she must give in now.

"Oh, Nigel, how can you talk so? you shall not, you shall not; my boy lay his death at his mother's door! There, it shall be as you will, you shall have this Barbara, whatever it costs me."

"There's a darling mother!"

"She has refused you, you say, she does not care for you; never mind, I will smooth your way for you. I don't see what good my life is to me, but I will do it for all that."

"Always my dearest friend, mother!"

"No, not your dearest now," and she shuddered. "Nigel if you have done with me, I will go. I have to think all this over quietly."

"And you will not tell me how you can help me?"

"No, you must leave it to me. I think I know where the difficulty lies, but if he thinks to cross me in that," her eyes glittered and looked dangerous for a moment; "no, no, Nigel, a man's discrimination may be at fault, but a woman's instinct, never; you have entrusted me with your trouble, leave the

future to me, a little time and patience and it will all come right."

A happy look flitted across Nigel's face as he kissed her gratefully, and then he lay back well satisfied, and watched her as she drew her shawl carelessly round her, and swept from the room; the weight was gone from his heart, he had laid his burden on her, and he knew with a faith that was rare in manhood, that she would not disappoint him; that, let her employ what means she would, she would somehow compass her ends.

Lady Strath meanwhile had betaken herself to her dressing-room; if she were tired or faint, she did not know it now, her maid was dismissed with orders that none were to disturb her; and as soon as she was left alone, she drew her chair to the open window with a feeling that somehow she could not breathe. I have said before that Lady Strath was no favorite of mine, she was not a good woman in the sense that we use the word good; but, neither was she bad, even knowing the mischief she was fated to work hereafter, I could almost find it in my heart to pity her; under the old law, it might have been well to stone one's enemy, and we may have wished him to be so stoned, but I can never imagine the sight a pleasant one.

I think it would almost have been a relief to Lady Strath, being a woman of strong passions,

could she have carried out to the full that rending of garments, and tearing of hair, to which we have referred. I think, could she have sat in the dust, and begrimed herself with ashes, and made known her troubles in a loud lamenting voice, it would have proved a sort of safety-valve to her; and she would have risen from her great humiliation, when the days of her so-called mourning were over, a sadder and a wiser woman. Neither would she have entangled herself as she did afterwards, in the net of circumstances; rending the web aside with such unholy hands, and making that crooked that was ordered to be straight?

She might lift up her voice and weep, but she could not call her whole house together to bear witness to her sorrow; her lamentations must be of the decent nineteenth-century sort; but as she sat there, she told herself as she had told Nigel, that her life was no good to her, and her trouble was very bitter.

She had brought him into the world, that he should turn round upon her like this; she knew none better that with all her faults, she had been a good mother to him; she had neglected Nest for him, she had given her daughter a few grains of maternal love, to lavish it all on Nigel; she had been his companion in health, his nurse in sickness, she had never thwarted him, never been weary; if he taxed

her patience, she did not show it; when he was ill, she was never away from his side; fond of gaiety as she was, and courted and flattered, she gave it all up willingly to remain in his sick room; she might have married over and over again, but for Nigel's sake: if his caprices were many, her tenderness was inexhaustible, and so it came to pass that they were more to each other than mother and son; and the years only increased Nigel's chivalrous love for her; as a boy it had been conspicuous, as a man it was even more so; often as their wills had clashed together, they had never suffered so severe a shock, or been in such danger of disruption as on this day in question.

It was not a mere maternal jealousy, or a dread of rivalry that troubled Lady Strath; she was too true-hearted a mother to fear his marrying; she desired this, as she desired all other good for him; she had held out kind welcoming hands to Gretchen; neither had she been ungracious to dark-eyed Maria; she would rather her son had married an English girl, and that was all. As soon as Nigel's absurd caprice had brought them to St. Ronans, a place which he chose and obstinately adhered to as soon as he heard Norman lived there, Lady Strath's keen eyes had surveyed all the county beauties, and fixed at last on Clare Travers, as being the most beautiful as well as the best bred

girl in those parts, save and excepting Hester Heathcote, whose merits Lady Strath strove to decry for reasons of her own.

Those Heathcotes—how she hated them—Barbara especially; from the time of Nigel's accident, they had been stumbling-blocks and eyesores to her; Nigel's unaccountable friendship with them, his prolonged stay in the Doctor's house, his morbid excess of gratitude, which made him repay a trifling benefit, by giving Barbara lessons; his determined visits and lingerings in the Heathcote garden day after day, and his resolute avoidance of all county society; all these things were bitter causes for jealousy, and as she dare not resent them openly on her son, she sowed seeds of secret and unavowed animosity between her and the Doctor's household; and being about as unreasonable as a foolish unprincipled woman could be, she chose to trace back the source of all her discomfort, past, present, and future, to Dr. Strath, who had yet further added to his several misdemeanours, that of being a firm friend of the Heathcotes.

There could be no question of any amnesty between Lady Strath and Norman, the thing was impossible; an implacable nature like hers, could not know the meaning of forgiveness. He had injured her boy, he had robbed him of health, not for years, but for a life-time; she had hated him

then, and she hated him now, all the more that she saw that Nigel had wholly forgotten the old grievance, and that Norman's friendship was becoming a necessity to him; it was gall and wormwood to have him visiting at her house, and to see the confidence between them. Norman knew that she felt it to be so, and came all the oftener; if Lady Strath was subtle in her enmity, Norman defied her openly, which made things all the worse when there came to be war between them to the death; for the straightforward contempt of an honest man is no match for the secret plottings of an incensed woman, who has but one wish in life, and that is to defeat her enemy by any means, and drive him from the field. I have said Lady Strath was not a bad woman, I mean not wholly bad; let sensational novelists say what they like, the thing is an anomaly in nature. She did not sit down deliberately to plot and scheme against Norman's happiness or to compass his ruin, such plots and schemings, belonging rather to the daggers and poisonings of another age. The devil knows better than to tempt a woman in the present century in that vulgar fashion: would it be likely that a well brought-up gentlewoman who read her Bible, and went to church twice a day on Sundays—except when it was wet—and gave largely in charities, would sell her soul like that?

Lady Strath had a young relative of her husband's staying with her, one of whom she was very fond, and a *protégé* of her own; it was a pure piece of benevolence having him at St. Ronans, for the poor fellow had had a bad illness in London, and country air would set him up; the only wonder was, when that object was attained that he did not go back to his lodgings in Ampton Street, but kept staying on; perhaps Robert Murray found his quarters too pleasant, and his aunt too kind, anyhow he made good his footing at St. Ronans, and enjoyed the purple and fine linen with the gusto of a young epicurean; for Robert Murray loved life, and was given to make himself fat on other people's goods.

By-and-by a lodging was procured for him at Durnford; it was a pity such good friends should part, as Lady Strath said. People began to shrug their shoulders and ask what he was doing there, the medical profession being well represented in Durnford, a fact on which Lady Strath begged to differ; she had heard, she did not know, but she thought, there was some slight dissatisfaction expressed,—the Sunningford doctors were a little negligent in their attentions, their work was too diffusive, spread over too large an area, the people suffered: might it not be well that Robert Murray, quite a rising young man, and well thought of by the faculty, should stay to pick up a few crumbs

that the others had let fall? Old Mrs. Hawkins doated on him, and Miss Kitty McArthur—well, young folk will be young folk, it was not for her to betray her nephew's secret, and Dr. Strath had certainly treated her badly; such a bear, my dear, quite a woman-hater, and he to pretend to flirt, and so on, and so on. I should be sorry to follow all the plausible sentences that flowed so glibly into each other, made up of the half truth, and that half falsehood, which is so much more dangerous than a whole tissue of lies.

Presently the innuendos grew bolder; there was detraction, doubts of Norman's professional talent; the old Doctor was pitied for possessing such a partner; he was unpopular in Durnford, people were shutting their doors against him, and no wonder. Susan Mogg's case was shamefully mismanaged, it was not the fever at all; Dr. Murray, it was doctor now, had explained it all to her; and Mrs. Sykes' child—well, it was not for her to repeat village scandal; Dr. Strath was a well meaning young man, but country practice, you see, and little talent were against him; would mortification have set in, Lady Travers, if the limb had been amputated? no, it is all a mistake, Mrs. Sykes did not prevent him, what woman would kill her child by such obstinacy? no, she was afraid—here Lady Strath shook her head—she was afraid Dr. Strath had mistaken his

profession; and that poor Dr. Heathcote if he ever recovered, which was not likely, would find half his practice gone, which, by-the-by, was the only true sentence of the whole. For the tide of popular opinion, always fickle and dangerous when set in motion by an unscrupulous hand, was running dead against Norman; he had got a bad name in Durnford, there was no denying; and Mr. Murray was now medical attendant at Briarsley, a fact that was soon made patent enough.

Little by little, by degrees, first unconsciously, then by double motives, a twist of truth here and there, an innuendo, a hint, a meaning smile, that's how the devil works now-a-days; and so was Lady Strath whispering and smiling away Norman's good name, and hardly earned reward; and now that an open and far more deadly temptation awaited her, would she have principle enough to resist it? you can answer that question yourselves.

Lady Strath knew why Barbara had refused her son; she had guessed Norman's secret, aye, and Barbara's too, long before Barbara knew it herself; she knew why Norman was toiling and waiting, and what was the reward he had set before himself, and she knew likewise how unconscious Barbara was: it was by this very unconsciousness that Lady Strath hoped to win.

That Norman should baulk Nigel of what he

desired, was an idea not to be entertained for a moment; he had robbed him of health, of all purpose in life, should he rob him of his wife too? she detested Barbara, but she had promised Nigel to do this thing, and do it she would; she would employ all her ingenuity, all her cleverness to this end; she did not disguise from herself the difficulty, nay, the humiliation it might entail on herself; but she knew that her son's heart, it might be his life, so frail and impetuous as he was, was set on this girl, and have her he should.

But how?

Think over it as she might, till her brain ached, and her pulses throbbed, she could devise no expedient for attaining her object; she knew Barbara's inflexible honesty would oppose her at all points; she could not reach her through her heart, for she loved Norman, and all pleadings on Nigel's behalf would be fruitless; neither could she see that any success was likely to arise if she tried to set Norman against her, he would as soon think evil of his own mother as of Barbara.

You see there was no beating about the bush now, the tempter had found her after all an easy prey; many half deceits had prepared the way for one great one, she was determined to win; could she have found deceit answer her purpose she would have used it without scruple; she must, she

thought, fight Norman with his own weapons, she must use truth to meet his truth, and sound the depths of his generosity; she had found out the morbid flaw in the strong armor of the man, the one vulnerable part in this Achilles, and through that she proposed to reach him; she was not wholly bad for she was doing evil that good might come to her son, she was cutting her own throat, in common parlance, to serve him; it was true she was injuring her enemy at the same time, and settling old scores with a vengeance, but still, could she have seen herself in her true colors, and as we see her, she would have been the first to cry shame on herself; and there was sufficient self-respecting good in the woman to ensure an honest repentance, could she have been brought to a knowledge of her sin.

CHAPTER III.

WINNIE'S ENIGMAS.

"O Moon! in the night I have seen you smiling
And shining so round and low;
You were bright! ah, bright! but your light is failing,
You are nothing now but a bow.

You moon, have you done something wrong in heaven
That God has hidden your face?
I hope, if you have, you will be forgiven,
And shine again in your place."

Jean Ingelow.

MRS. STRATH sat opposite her son in the little room where they took their meals, breakfast was half over, but, as yet, they had interchanged no word.

She had sat opposite him in this way for years, pouring out his coffee and ministering to his wants, and often he had said no word to her, with the exception of his brief morning salutation, or, perhaps, a casual remark about the weather. It might be the man's peculiarity, but he never showed himself specially sociable at this hour of

the day, it was his habit to read his few business letters, mere correspondence for friendship or pleasure not being much in his way, and then he would apply himself to his paper; grumbling a little in an undertone if it were damp or badly folded, scanning its columns hurriedly between every mouthful, with the eagerness of a hungry politician; and only throwing it aside when he had finished his meal.

"Anything in the paper this morning, Norman?" his mother would hazard sometimes, when weary of the silence, during which she would be debating the butcher's bill in her mind, and wondering if veal were too dear, and what Norman would like for his dinner, not that she ever dared ask him, Dr. Strath not being a man given to much consideration of his meat or drink, though very careful of his raiment: his mother had too much tact to strive to rouse him to interest in any of the petty details and incidents of domestic life. Had he been married, I have little doubt that Dr. Strath would have proved himself eminently domestic, and might even have been awakened to something like enthusiasm on the price of veal, marriage sometimes working such miracles; but, as things were, the only safe matter for discussion was the laundress, when Norman would wax eloquent on the subject of buttons and collars; in this matter, indeed, he was rather given

to consider himself an ill-used man, the great grievance being the deficiency of starch; he would handle his collars, and use strong language as he did so, not always evincing that charity towards his laundress that the Apostle inculcates; to all of which Mrs. Strath would listen meekly, as befits a woman, after which she would go and wage stubborn war with the delinquent.

She once declared to Barbara that Norman's collars were making her grey before her time. "What I have to suffer, my dear, between him on one hand, and the washerwoman on the other, no one knows but myself; I begin to dread Saturday, and even Sunday is no day of rest for me."

"If I were you, I would not take any trouble about it," was Barbara's frank rejoinder; and, to do her justice, I don't think she would; she would tease Norman about his collars, putting her little hands to her neck in a strangled sort of way, and suggesting much friction from starch, or she would condole with him on his limp appearance. "Why don't you get rid of your beard, Norman?" she would say to him, "it hides too much of your collar, not but what they are better hidden, if they are always got up like that," no wonder Mrs. Strath declared they were making her grey before her time.

But to-day being Thursday, there was no talk

of laundresses, and, after Mrs. Strath had reckoned that veal was too dear, and lamb only disguised mutton, and had decided secretly on beef, and found no longer employment for her thoughts, she had hazarded that inquiry, that there might be news in the paper which might make it worth her while to put on her spectacles.

"News, there is never any news," returned Dr. Strath, when this question had reached his ears.

"Really nothing in the paper?" mildly observed Mrs. Strath.

"Nothing at all," was the ready response, as he finished one column and began another.

"Dear, dear, then I wonder what you can find to occupy you all breakfast-time. I wanted to know, Norman——" but what Mrs. Strath wanted to know, never transpired; for at that moment Jenny entered with a letter, the reading of which took up so much time and incited Norman to such marvellous contortions of face, that Mrs. Strath began to be in a fever of curiosity, and, at last, when there was nothing but a crooked line between his eyes and hair indicating forehead, she could keep silence no longer.

"Well, Norman——"

"I wonder what mischief she's brewing now?" was the singular response.

"She—whom do you mean, my dear?"

"My Lady——" and then he set his teeth, grinning horribly, and looking highly pugnacious.

"Oh," observed Mrs. Strath, in a meaning tone. "Well, whatever has she got to say for herself? you used not to be correspondents, Norman?" His only answer to this was to push the letter towards her, which she took eagerly.

It was a civil little note enough, but how Mrs. Strath hated the very sight of the neat writing, and faint perfume with which the St. Ronans notes were always scented; they seemed to disturb Norman's olfactory nerves, also, for he always threw them from him with disgust. Perfumes were Norman's abhorrence, he had something to say even against the sweet attar of rose, which was his mother's special favourite, but patchouli,—he once caught Barbara using patchouli,—and she never heard the last of it.

"It is a very civil note," said Mrs. Strath, "much too civil, I am afraid. What does she want you for, I wonder?"

"That is what I should like to know, you see; she says, 'to talk over an important subject.' I think I shall plead an engagement, she is so very pressing."

"Do you think Nigel can be ill again?" inquired his mother, anxiously.

"Well, there's no knowing. How can he help

being ill, or fancying himself ill, with nothing to do? I know I should in his place," and Dr. Strath straightened his broad chest and stretched out that strong right arm of his, as though he felt that work was meat and drink—the very breath of life to him. "How a man of Nigel's abilities can dawdle and dream his life away is an enigma to me, it is a fearful waste of talents and substance. Heigho! we can't make other people share our opinions, I wish we could; if only I could have the management of him a little."

"I don't think you would do much with him," returned Mrs. Strath, sighing, for her brother's son was very dear to her.

"Would I not? let me try first. I would make him enter parliament, or take a farm, a real working farm, I mean; we should hear no more of heart disease or rapid decline for the next ten years, I'd warrant you. I don't deny there may be latent mischief, but a parcel of old women doctors, to say nothing of his mother, have magnified it tenfold, and frightened him into imagining all sorts of things; they call temper, palpitations,—pshaw, I have no patience with such rubbish."

"But, Norman, he is very delicate; Dr. Heathcote has said so over and over again."

"Well, of course he's delicate; I suppose any one would see that, if they used their eyes; and

those excitements into which he puts himself are the worst things for him. I have told him so plainly, and so has the Doctor, but it is not a bit of use; if people will kill themselves before their time comes for dying, I don't see how the doctors are to blame; of course, he'll never make an old man, but I don't know that I shall either; but I am sure of one thing, I shall bide my time."

"But Norman!"

"Well?—"

"I suppose you will go over to St. Ronans."

"I don't know. I suppose I shall. I am to make an appointment, she says. Did you ask Barbara for this evening, mother?"

"I did of course, but she can't come, her father wants her to go over to Dort's Mill this evening; you know, I dare say, that the Doctor wishes Leigh to come home."

"Yes, I know, we were talking it over yesterday. Hester has objections, but I over-ruled them. I told them both it was putting Leigh in a wrong position, leaving him so long at the Mill; and as the Doctor was against their taking lodgings in Durnford there was nothing but to have them home."

"I suppose Leigh will still go to Briarsley?"

"I don't know. I think for the present, till something turns up: Leigh wants to enter a merchant's office in London; so much for his

college education; I don't know but what it will be the wisest in the end, but it is hard lines for the Doctor."

"He will feel it dreadfully."

"Yes; and so will they all, Barbara especially. Well, as she is going over to Dort's Mill, I suppose I had better walk up this evening to St. Ronans."

"I don't see how you can get out of it."

"Neither do I, so the matter's settled. I must be off now, good-bye," and then he closed the door after him, leaving Mrs. Strath to betake herself to the larder or the kitchen, with the one regret uppermost, that veal was certainly too dear.

After that she put on her spectacles, and read the Psalms and Lessons for the day, such being her usual custom, and then she took up the paper that Norman had thrown aside, and applied herself diligently to pick up such crumbs of intelligence as she could glean from the leading article and court circular, after which she darned socks till dinner-time. Not a very varied existence was Mrs. Strath's; but I do not know that we need pity her, seeing that she thanked Heaven devoutly every day of her life for the peaceful harbourage to which she had attained; she had had much, and now she had little, but the little contented her; she was a solitary woman in some respects, for though a dutiful son, Dr. Strath held himself somewhat aloof

from her, and kept his inner life to himself, but they understood each other, and in her heart she knew that she was more to him than he would permit to be seen.

He was a son that any mother would have been proud of, but she could not disguise from herself that he failed somewhat in those small courtesies and little demonstrations in which her soul delighted; but she knew also that such was the manner of the man, and took all that was given her thankfully, showing on all occasions such tact and sweetness that she made his home a pleasant place to him. Barbara's visits and her garden were her two thorough enjoyments; when she was budding her roses, or sitting working with Bab on her little stool beside her, she would not have envied the queen on her throne; and seeing that such was the case, I do not think that in spite of all her reverses we need pity Mrs. Strath.

I don't know that, take all in all, the day was quite so satisfactory to Barbara; great happiness, like great sorrow, is hard to bear; there are breathless states in which intense rapture amounts to a positive pain; the pendulum of our being has swayed to an extreme, it vibrates madly, we are oppressed, bewildered; by-and-by there will be revulsion, distress; not till the just balance is restored and we have our happiness, as it were, firmly in our grasp,

in a visible, tangible form, when we are sure it will not melt into thin air, and leave us void of joy—then, and not till then, shall we be at peace.

And already the revulsion had come to Barbara.

Last night she could have shouted aloud in her triumph, she was cured of her blindness, her eyes were open, she could see; the new light dazzled her, and then it became a reality, a glory; to love and to be beloved, to know it, to be sure of it, this, this was life: hitherto she had been a neophyte, now the great mystery was revealed to her, every breath she drew was a joy—why need I go on—do you not know it, and you, and you, and all earth's happy ones? was there ever such a wondrous story written as that old, old story—old as the ages and new to the end of time—the only and real elixir of life?

Oh, story that we all try to tell for ourselves, and whose telling is so beautiful in our eyes! what is it after all but a vast serial written by the king in his palace, and the peasant in his hut, ever to be written and never to be completed, till time shall be no more.

But the revulsion had come to Barbara; her first waking moments had been delicious, a mingling of bird songs and heart music together, and then came the remembrance of St. Ronans to sober her, and steady the pendulum of her thoughts; she began to

understand, as she dressed herself, that his affection would be a thorn in her side, that it would be soreness of eyes to her, that a joy that was built on another's pain could not remain a joy for ever, or was but at best a mixed pleasure; and, as she thought of it all, pangs of genuine pity began to tear at her heart-strings. "If only he were my brother, and Bab's master, how happy I should be," she said to herself; "but it is all over with Bab's master"—and with feminine inconsistency she began to lament for her lost friend, leaving that other joy to take care of itself; only now and then there were odd thrills, which made her feel that all was not so sad as she would have herself believe; in all of which, Bab was showing herself a thorough woman.

But do what she would, happiness predominated, and she went down to breakfast with the proud feeling of one who has a hidden treasure. She was pale and *distraite* it was true; her heart beat so loudly that she was afraid people would hear it; and if anyone looked at her she went as red as fire. Of course she did not eat—grief creates hunger often—grief is exhaustive, happiness excites too much for appetite; but she sat looking so guilty that of course everyone noticed it, and had some remark to make. "She had a headache," "She was unwell," "She had heard some news,"—this last from Connie. Barbara shook her head, and then was terribly

ashamed of the implied falsehood. "Why can't you let me alone?" she returned, with a touch of her old petulance; "I have slept badly, and have dreamed," which was quite true. "Daddie, if you have finished your breakfast, shall I read the debates to you?"

She felt the newspaper would be a refuge; she was glad to hide her hot face behind it. Her reading was mechanical, but it soothed her too; she was quite thankful for Disraeli's long speech — she managed to solve a knotty problem for herself while she got through it. Should she tell her father about St. Ronans or not? She had always made him her confidant—always; she had gone naturally to him in her troubles, but now she hesitated; he was only just recovering from a great shock,—it would agitate him; nay more, from something he had let fall once, she feared it might be a disappointment to him.

No men, however perfect, are without their weaknesses. Dr. Heathcote was not without his, as I have said once before: he was ambitious for his children. Hester's broken engagement with Sir Geoffrey Hunsden had been a great blow to him; he had never quite forgiven Geoffrey, and he never would. He was not implacable, but Geoffrey was no longer as a son to him; he would take no favor at his hands; he spoke of him as a good man, but a man too weak to know his own mind. He

never would believe but that Hester had sustained grievous loss from him; he treated her at all times as a woman whose heart was broken. "It will go hard with her," he said, over and over again; "she will never marry: and I want all my daughters to be married; but now the flower of my flock will be left, and no man will gather her;" and the doctor grieved over her, and would not be comforted.

Barbara knew this, therefore she hesitated; she would not tell him now, she would wait; she would not even tell Mrs. Strath. Was she not bound in all honour to St. Ronans not to reveal his humiliation? Other girls might vaunt of their triumph, but no such vaunting should be hers. Had she not her secret, and could she tell one without showing the other? No, she would not confide in her father,—not yet, at least; and having arrived at this determination and the end of her speech together, she folded up her paper, Dr. Heathcote having fallen into a doze, and stole away.

She gardened, she read, she painted, she tried needlework and idleness by turns, but it was the longest day she had ever passed in her life; it was interminable; it was not to be measured by ordinary days. Every ring of the bell, every footfall in the passage, brought the color to her face, and made her tremble. All through the long afternoon she dreaded lest Norman should come: she wondered

how she would ever bring herself to look at him, and how she should meet his eyes; how could she speak little common-place remarks, knowing as she did, what he was to her? Would she ever subdue her rebellious color, or steady her pulses? If she heard him coming, she would run away; and yet when evening came, and no Dr. Strath, she was heart-sick with disappointment.

She put on her hat, and called Ben, her father wanted her to go down to the Mill: the house and garden were becoming like a prison to her in this strong craving for his presence. Perhaps she might meet him in the village; the thought fevered her in an instant; but when she had come to the place where she found Winnie, her step flagged and became languid; there was no hope of him now: little did she know that but an angle of the wall parted them as he went leisurely on to keep his appointment with Lady Strath.

So heavy were her thoughts, that it was a relief to her when she came in sight of the Mill.

Winnie was in the kitchen-garden, brushing up the red and yellow leaves with a broom she had smuggled from the back premises: it was twice as long as herself, and had to be handled carefully.

Her manner of manipulation was unique.

Bab stood and admired her.

It was a matter of much gravel and few leaves, and the garden paths looked dolorous.

Sometimes she held her broom daintily at the extreme end and swayed it with difficulty to and fro; when it would not move, she dragged it after her; finding that did not answer, and the leverage incomplete, she held it as near the brush as possible; this worked well, only it had the singular effect of bringing the stick smartly on the top of her head. Nothing daunted, however, Winnie rubbed her curls crossly and went on afresh. The path began to have a scratched and unwholesome appearance; the leaves played at leap-frog with each other; the gravelly dust blew in Winnie's eyes, and made her wink and cough; she began to meditate, resting both her fat hands on the broom. "Hem, hem!" coughed Winnie.

"My dear child, what a dreadful mess you are making! Whatever will Mammie Ruth say?"

Winnie winked her watery eyes at Barbara, and then applied her fists carefully for their further ease and comfort.

"They do smart, they do; Miss Barb?"—her name for Barbara.

"Well, Winnie?"

"Ta feyther tell'd me all the story about Ad and Eve, Miss Barb; he teached me and Bebe and the ittle black kitten, he did."

"Yes, Winnie?"

"All about Ad and Eve, he did—God made them," here Winnie folded her hands and looked reverent—"out of the dust of the earth He made 'em; the big book says so, it do."

"Of course it does, Winnie."

"How did He get the dust out of their eyes, Miss Barb?" pursued Winnie in a reflective voice. Barbara turned her head away in a vain attempt to preserve gravity.

"If I were you, I would go in and wash my face, Winnie. You must not brush all the gravel about like that; give me the broom," and Barbara worked hard to restore tidiness. "You must have a little basket, and pick up the leaves one by one: mother won't like her broom taken. But it is time you were in bed, little one; the sun has gone long ago."

"The sun's got a yellow face, and goes by-bye in a great pink bed, trimmed all round with gold; I've seed it often. Who tucks him up, Miss Barb?"

"Winnie, Winnie, you are incorrigible."

"Corabel," says Winnie, who had the tongue of a parrot, "there's a 'ittle moon up there; this is a 'ittle one: what do they do with the old moons, Miss Barb?"*

Barbara remained mute with astonishment.

* A true speech by a child.

"Do they cut them up into little bits to make the stars? Why are you going away, Miss Barb?"

"That child will be the death of me, Naomi," said Barbara, as she entered the mill-kitchen; and then she related Winnie's odd speeches.

"She takes after Paul," said Winnie's mother proudly; "she has got his forehead and cleverness and all. Ruth was just such another. Ruth, here's Miss Heathcote telling such funny things about our Winnie."

Ruth met Barbara gravely, as she always did now: they had not yet got to be at their ease with each other. With Ruth's new name had come a new dignity,—a very sober and quiet dignity, it is true, but it made itself felt for all that; there was something of stateliness, too, a stand-offishness, which, gentle as it was, would have made people slow to be familiar with her; they could not have patronised her, for example; all of which made Barbara feel that they would not have to be ashamed of their new sister.

There was something quaint too in her loveliness: she had changed her whole style of dress and hair to please Leigh, and, though both suited her, she looked no longer like Ruth Canham; the village schoolmistress would never have worn those trailing skirts, or crowned herself with those thick plaits, after Hester's fashion, any more than she would

have worn the loose lace sleeves which showed the white arms to such perfection. She bore herself a little stiffly, perhaps, as was natural in her changed dress; it made her feel a little shy and awkward, but it became her to a marvel; already she looked as much out of place in the mill-kitchen as Leigh himself did. Paul began to apologise for his pipe and shirt-sleeves, and Naomi looked more homely than ever. "Our place is not fit for the likes of her," Paul would say, with a rueful glance. "I must buy you a new gown, Naomi, and we must take to sitting in the front parlor, and having a girl," all of which things Naomi skilfully averted; for she knew that to deprive Paul of his pipe, shirt-sleeves, and great wicker-chair, would have been to rob his life of much of its pleasure.

"I have brought a message from my father, Ruth," said Bab, as soon as she had seated herself. "Daddie wants Leigh to come home."

Ruth looked a little frightened; she did not seem to understand.

"To come home, Barbara?"

"Yes; but he is not going to leave you behind, don't be afraid," returned Barbara, laughing. "You see Daddie is better now, getting quite strong again, and he feels to want to have Leigh near him. You know what a great old house it is; there is room enough for us all and to spare."

"Leigh talked of taking lodgings in Durnford," began Ruth in an embarrassed tone: "but for Naomi's pressing us to remain at the mill, he would have done it long ago; they are very kind, much too kind, as I am always telling Naomi, but our being here puts Paul out of his ways a little."

"I dare say it does; but you must not let Leigh think of going to Durnford, Ruth: things are bad enough there already, without his making them worse. They say Mr. Murray is treating Daddie shamefully, stealing away his practice: did you hear how Norman was insulted last time he rode through the village?"

"Some lads pelted him; yes, Paul told us all about it: you don't think your father would like us to go to Durnford, then?"

"I am sure he would not: he does not know half, what we do, but things are getting very bad there indeed. No, you must make up your mind to come to us, Ruth: Daddie must not be disappointed. We all think it will be the best thing for him to come home for a little, and then they can talk over Leigh's future, and make such arrangements as are best for him."

"If Miss Heathcote has no objection," stammered Ruth.

"Hester—ah, no," returned Barbara quickly; "she and Daddie have settled it all between them;

she is fitting up a little sitting-room for you, so that you may not be with us more than you like. You are not coming as a visitor, you know, Ruth, but as Leigh's wife, and you must try to feel at home with us all."

"You are very good," said Ruth, and she turned her head aside, rather proudly Barbara thought, but in reality because her eyes were full of tears; but she was spared further reply, for at that moment Leigh came in.

"What, is that you, Babchen!" he said, embracing her boisterously; for things were going well with him at present, and he had recovered much of his boyish spirits. "What brought you over here this evening, little woman?"

"She has a message from your father," interrupted Ruth: "he wants you to go home."

Leigh turned towards her in bright surprise.

"Do you mean we are to go to Heathcote to stay?"

"Yes, he wishes it. Is it not good of him—of them all?" continued Ruth. She might have left the message for Barbara, as she had walked all that distance to tell it; but in these early days she showed a sort of jealousy over her young husband; she could not bear even such telling of good news to reach him but through her. Barbara had instinctively perceived this trait in her, and it made her

sore with an odd soreness. "She need not be jealous of me now," said poor Bab to herself: "I shall never monopolise him any more;" and then she would grow very brother-sick. She did not stop to analyse Ruth's jealousy, or she would have found out that it came from a sense of her inferiority: she was his wife, truly, but she was lowly born, and his sisters might look down on her; in spite of her happiness, she could not forget that. "Is it not good of him?" she repeated. "Dear Leigh, I am so glad for your sake that you should go home."

She had whispered this last, touching his arm gently. She almost wished Barbara were not there, that he and she might have this joy to themselves; he answered her with a kind glance, but his first burst of gratitude was for Barbara.

"This is all your doing, Barbara darling," he said, with one of his old caresses; but Barbara disclaimed it.

"It was Norman's thought, not mine, Leigh. I should never have dared propose it; but Daddie wants you so. You and he will have long talks together, and then it will be settled whether you go to London, or not."

"I must go to London," he rejoined; "a man with a wife can't live on seventy pounds a year. So I am to come back to the dear old place, am I?" What a fine time we'll have! I must smoke a pipe

in the den, Bab, and you shall spin a long yarn, just for the sake of old times. Hurra! long live the governor!" and Leigh, as much a boy as ever, flung up his cap, and caught it. "God bless him! for there's not such another in the world, and never will be!"

"You are right there, Leigh," said Bab, with just a tremble in her voice.

Ruth stood apart, a little sad and drooping; he had forgotten her, then, in his happiness. Might it not be best that they two should be left to struggle alone? Perhaps in his father's house, with his old surroundings, she might be less to him than she was here. She did not recognise this phase of Leigh's character; to her he had never been boyish or boisterous: the Leigh that Barbara loved, was a person unknown to Ruth.

"Are you so tired of the Mill," she said in her grave full voice, "that you should be so happy to get away from it?" and her great eyes were full of gloom as she looked at him.

Bab stared a little, and turned away impatiently. "She has everything, and yet she is not contented," thought Bab wearily; "if I had—I know what—to call my very, very own, I would never be jealous, or say one word of reproach!" and she grew a little scornful over Ruth's disconsolate speech. But Leigh knew better: love had taught him many

things, and he understood the proud humility that belonged to Ruth's nature.

"We have been very happy here," he said in the low voice that had first won her from the path of duty; "but I am glad to go home. I think I am most glad, because then they will learn to know and love my wife, but not as I love her;" and then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I must go home now," said Barbara. "I will bid good-bye to Naomi;" but she did not for some time; she went to the open lattice in the outer kitchen, and looked out into the dusky orchard, where Paul was filling Naomi's apron with wind-blown apples. Winnie had had her pinafore full too, but they had dribbled all out at one end, while she was hard at work munching a large red one. The young crescent moon of which Winnie had spoken peeped at them between the merry boughs. "It's a rare night for the stars," said Paul.

"Aye, master, that it is," she could hear Naomi reply. "I won't mind to carry any more. Come along, Winnie; little girls ought to be by-bying, and not wetting their feet with the dews."

"I've bitten two rosy-cheeks," said Winnie. "I didn't stealed the broom, mother; I asked it to come out a-walking, and it comed; it's knocked me on the head, and it's very sore. Is the angels singing to Bebe now? Yes, very much, thank you, amen. I

won't say no prayers to-night, feyther, but I want my boots off——" The rest of Winnie's sleepy sentence was lost on her father's shoulder.

"Good-night and good-bye," said Barbara cheerfully, as she went back to them. "I don't want you to come with me, Leigh;" and then she went home through the dark lanes, wondering what that weight meant at her heart.

CHAPTER IV.

NORMAN'S VOW.

* * * * * *

"'She was his joy,' he said, 'his comforter.'
But he could trust me. I was not debarred
Whate'er my heart approved to say to her.
Approved! O torn, and tempted, and ill-starred,
And breaking heart, approve not nor demur;
It is the serpent that beguileth thee
With 'God doth know' beneath this apple-tree.

Yea, God doth know, and only God doth know.
Have pity, God, my spirit groans to Thee!
I hear Thy curse primeval, and I go;
But heavier than on Adam falls on me
My tillage of the wilderness; for lo!
I leave behind the woman, and I see,
As 'twere, the gates of Eden closing o'er
To hide her from my sight for evermore."

Jean Ingelow.

WHILE Barbara was the bearer of good tidings at the Mill, Dr. Strath was girding himself up for his encounter with Lady Strath.

Dr. Strath was a man much given to girding himself up on all occasions; he could do his duty as

well as any other man, according to his lights and the measure of the strength within him; he was not one to make much of the toughness of any job. He was accustomed to say that complaining would weaken a Hercules; he had small sympathy for any one who dwelt largely on their own feelings, and treated the vapors of his richer patients with a caustic dryness, that made them vow all manner of feminine vengeance against him. It might have been honest, but I am not sure that it was politic or agreeable. A man, to be perfect, ought not to disdain the courtesies of life. To deal largely in golden deeds, one need not dispense with the smaller and less useful change; but I am sorry to say that Dr. Strath did not aim at perfection, and merely bore himself so, that his daily work might be done, and his daily life lived, without the soil of any special reproach. He had had his ambitions, but they were dead; and though he would have scorned to complain, the narrowness of his circumstances crushed him.

He regarded Lady Strath as his enemy, and hated her honestly; it would have pleased him to speak his mind out to her; he had a feeling that he must do so very strongly one of these days, but none the less would he have heaped coals of fire on her head, when the time for so heaping them came.

But there was one privilege which he always

reserved for himself, and that was the absence of any outward subservience of look and bearing; he owed it to his honesty, to be as little gracious and conciliatory as possible to his enemy; he would button himself up tightly on such occasions, and stalk into her presence with as black a brow as possible; till the time came for the coal-heaping, he would never allow by word or look that he was not absolutely hostile to her; and, considering his injuries, I do not think we need wonder at him.

On the present occasion he was very implacable; she had challenged him to this encounter; she had named time and place; she had put, as it were, the weapons in his hand: he would deign no graciousness or infuse any cordiality into his greeting; if the conversation could be guided into his hands, he vowed to himself that it should be the briefest they had ever had. She had wronged him as no other woman had ever wronged him, and it would need all his self-control to refrain from telling her so, but, if he could, he would so refrain; so much he promised himself as he crossed the threshold, and his mind was still more made up, when he was ushered into the immediate presence of his enemy.

Hitherto he had always been kept waiting, but now he had hardly time to assume his blackest aspect, before she was up with him, and had laid her hand on his arm with a light pressure. "

"Norman, I am so much obliged to you for coming to me," she said, and she almost drew him to a seat; with his quick instinct he detected in a moment her paleness, and the involuntary trembling of her voice, and that she did not raise her eyes to his as she spoke to him. It might be that the time for that coal-strewing had already come, but he made up his mind that whatever he had to hear he would hear standing; it made him more conscious of his strength and independence; it had always given him an advantage over her in their talks. Lady Strath was wise enough to know this as she strove to draw him to a seat, but he was determined that no seat should hold him.

"Thank you, I will not sit down; of course, as you sent for me I have come, Lady Strath;" and then there was a moment's silence between them. She was measuring the man's strength, and considering what she should first say to him; but he would give her no opening.

"I am in great trouble," she said to him, at last, and then she looked him full in the face.

He bowed in silence.

"Such trouble and perplexity have come upon me that I do not know well how to bear it. I do not think any other woman is tried as I am tried."

Another stiff bend of the head; it roused her into quick speech at last.

"Norman, if you do not help me, I don't know what I shall do. Nigel is ill again."

"I am sorry to hear it, Lady Strath,—more sorry perhaps, than surprised;" and then again he inclined himself to listen.

"How coldly you speak! We have not been good friends, Norman, but I think you might forget all that now, when we are in trouble; at least, a generous man would not remember it. And there is my poor boy suffering, and you will not stir a finger to help him." It was weak and puerile of her, and roused all his contempt.

"At least I have stirred a foot," he returned, dryly. "If you have sent for me to tell me Nigel is ill, I am very sorry; it is a sad thing to see time and health misused as he misuses both. I don't think I ever heard of a sadder case. If you wish me to see him as a friend, I will do so; but if it be my professional aid you require, I must decline;" but she interrupted him hurriedly.

"No, no, there is no need of that; he will see no doctor, and if he would, my nephew, Robert Murray, would attend him." She was a clever woman, but she had better not have said that; we may not be timorous, but I don't know that it is wise to flaunt a red rag before a bull, unless we have a taste for roaring. For all Norman's black looks and surly answers, she might have held her peace about

Robert Murray. It was a little bit of feminine spite that cost her dear in the end.

"Mr. Murray is attending Nigel, then?" He would never show, if he could help it, any professional courtesy to the interloper.

"Yes; we thought it better. Dr. Heathcote has such old-fashioned notions; we don't think he quite understood Nigel's case. And Robert Murray is such a clever young man; you should hear what Lady Travers says about him." She could not help this thrust; but she stopped as a sneer crossed Dr. Strath's face. She had made a mistake.

"Thank you for bringing up the subject," he replied; "it is one on which I have long wished to speak to you. There is no time like the present opportunity, after all. Dr. Heathcote and I are deeply indebted to you, Lady Strath, for the way you have been busying yourself in our affairs."

She bit her lip; she had made a mistake indeed.

"I suppose it is a pleasant sight to a woman to see the man whose character she has slandered away. I don't think a man would feel it so; but there is no accounting for tastes. I scarcely see the necessity for such hatred; but as far as Durnford and even Sunningford is concerned, I am as good as ruined."

She kept her eyes from him, and paled visibly.

"I do not understand you, Norman," she stammered. His face was not good to look at.

"I don't know but what killing a man by inches may be equivalent to murder. I don't wish to call a woman hard names, especially when she is my uncle's wife. I suppose you have slandered me about as foully as a man can be slandered; my wonder is that a lady can soil her hands with such work."

"I don't know what you mean," she said again; and this time she tried to raise her eyes to his face and failed, but inwardly she groaned and called herself a fool.

"I certainly did not think that my words contained any difficulty, but if you wish I will speak plainly. I don't know why I should be standing here in your house, Lady Strath; for you have injured me in a way no man can forgive."

"Not if I ask you to forgive me, Norman?" she said, almost inaudibly.

"I don't think it should be asked or even named between us," he returned, quickly; "if I said I could forgive you, I should lie heartily. You have wronged me with the bitterest and most insufferable wrong, and I will not be hypocrite enough to say that I shall ever forget it."

"He was my own nephew; why should I not have him here?" she answered, trying to defend herself

feebly; "surely there is room enough for another doctor. I don't know why you should be so hard upon me, Norman, because I try to befriend a poor relation; if he interferes with you or Dr. Heathcote, he shall go. It is not my fault if people like him better than they like you."

"Did Robert Murray tell you how the lads pelted me in the Durnford lanes?"

"He was very sorry, very sorry indeed," she returned quickly; "and I was sorry, too."

"I can believe it, Lady Strath. When I think of my injuries, I almost forget the respect I owe you as a woman. It is a mean, treacherous trick you have been serving me. I don't know that the sweetness of the revenge may be quite so palatable, when I tell you that, in spite of its blackness, it has done me good. It makes the saying of my prayers a difficulty, perhaps; but many a better man than myself may find it hard to forgive some trespasses."

"Norman, I have not been good to you, but you must forgive me;" but the blackness of his brow was odious to her.

"I am burning with righteous indignation. I should think myself mean-spirited and little to forget such wrongs as mine. I could have forgiven you that smuggling of Robert Murray; I could even have forgiven that mean poaching of his in other men's manors; but those innuendoes—those slanders

you have cast on my professional character—it is that I cannot and will not forgive."

"I only said what I thought was true, Norman."

"You thought it true that I mismanaged Susan Mogg's case," he retorted fiercely—"that it was not fever—putrid, reeking fever too? You believed that, in that other case, I deferred amputation till mortification set in, and that that poor child lost its life through my carelessness? you believed this? You know that you lie when you tell me this, Lady Strath."

His wrath was intolerable to her; she shrank away from the finger of his scorn as he pointed it to her; he was a hard man in his dealings at times, but she had tried him beyond his strength. Though he felt that good was coming to him out of all this evil, he could not forbear overwhelming her with his bitter anger; she had roused a spirit very rarely roused in Dr. Strath, and it was mastering him; she had put the weapons in his hand, and he was using them with a vengeance, and now she was shrinking from his stabs.

"Norman, Norman, will you not hear me?"

"No! you have sent for me here, and you shall listen to what I have to say. Why should I have pity on you, who have never shown any to me? I wonder you can lie down on your bed at nights, and think

how you have injured Doctor Heathcote, taking mean advantage when God had smitten him in his trouble. He has come back to his work, and found bitter ravage—half his practice gone; and when he turns to me for help, I am the last man who can give it to him. I suppose, if you were drowning, I should plunge into the river to save you, Lady Strath; but I don't see how else I can be induced to show you mercy."

"You must show it me now," she said, catching at his words; and she rose and put her two hands on his arms pleadingly. Bitterly as he hated her, and righteous as was his anger, he could not but pity her, as she stood there hardly able to support herself, with the tears rolling down her face; looking at her in the full light, he could see the wrinkles and lines that marred its smoothness, and the streaks of grey in her hair that he had never noticed before; enemy as she was, and cruelly as she had used him all his life, he could not forget just then that she was Nigel's mother.

"You have brought it on yourself, Lady Strath; you and I should never have had this talk," and then he tried somewhat gently to reseat her; but she would not quit her hold of him, and he was obliged to place himself beside her.

"You have been very hard to me," she said at last. "I am a proud woman, but I think for Nigel's

sake I could even kneel to you," and then she grew almost suffocated with her sobs.

"If you have anything to tell me about Nigel, I will listen to you," he answered, and his tone was softer. "You and I ought never to speak of ourselves to each other, Lady Strath; but if it concerns him, I will hear you."

"It does—it does. Oh, Norman! if you knew what I am suffering, you would pity me—to think that I should come to you, to you, for this thing!"

"What thing, Lady Strath?"

"To save him. He is ill, he has his old pain, he looks death-like, and he will have no assistance; and all because his heart is set on this girl!"

"What girl, Lady Strath?" and then, as a sudden light dawned upon him, "do you mean he is in love with Hester?"

"With Hester! Oh, that it were so! but it is far, far worse. But he is not to be reasoned out of it—unhappy mother that I am—he loves Barbara."

"Barbara?"

"Yes, Barbara—Barbara Heathcote. Can you conceive it? I beg your pardon, Norman, I believe you like the girl yourself." She had not meant to say this, but the look of his face compelled her, such a flash of his eye as answered her.

"On your peril, Lady Strath!" he said menacingly;

and the roughness and loudness of his voice were dreadful to her.

"No, I will not—I did not mean to offend you," she cried piteously. "See how humble I can be for my boy's sake. When he told me yesterday, I would not believe him; I would not till he made me. He swore before heaven and earth he would make her his wife: he is quite mad—quite!"

Dr. Strath shuddered.

"He loves Barbara Heathcote—he will have her! But he cannot; she is mine, Lady Strath."

"Have you asked her, Norman?"

"No, I have not asked her; but what does that matter? It is all no good speaking of this. Do you think I shall let him rob me of my one ewe-lamb when he has everything—everything?"

Then she almost cast herself upon him in her despair. "Norman, if it would help me, I would grovel on the ground before you. I have been your enemy, I have used you badly, I will admit anything and everything; you shall put your foot upon me, if you will, but spare my boy."

He tried not to show his disgust at her cringing; perhaps her sorrow touched his better nature.

"I am sparing him, Lady Strath," he answered as gently as he could.

"No, no; you are visiting your anger on him. And he, what has he done to you? You have made

his life bitter to him, a long weariness and pain; has he ever known what health means, and all through your fault? and now you are going to make death preferable to him," and she wept aloud.

The stubborn look came back to his face. "The old grievance, the old wrong! God forbid that all our childish wrong-doing should be so remembered by Him."

"Is it for me to forget it, who am his mother? Do I not know the weariness that his life is to him? and now if you take Barbara from him, he will die. Norman, did you not say that if the time should ever come for you to do good to him, you would do it, even at your own cost? Are you less generous than you were in your boyish days?"

He caught his breath once as though he had been struck, and, steadily as he bore himself, a paleness crept over his face as he listened to her; her light touch on his arm was insufferable to him; he released himself, though not without difficulty, and stood erect.

"You are not going to leave me?" she pleaded.

"Why should I not leave you, Lady Strath?" he answered; "there is nothing more that I can say." Then she interposed herself between him and the door, holding out her hand as she did so.

"You will not tell Nigel this that has passed between us?" she implored.

"Why should I not tell him? You must let me judge of that;" but still she would not let him go.

"It will undo all my work," she persisted. Then he turned upon her with a fiercer frown than she had seen yet—

"No, I will not spoil it: it is as pretty a piece of work as the devil has ever devised, or woman has woven;" then he got him out of her presence, still with that dour look on his face.

He wanted to prove to himself that she had lied; there was a load on his heart that seemed to suffocate him; he stood still for a moment to take, as it were, fresh breath, and then he went up to Nigel's room.

He knew where he should find him; he went straight up to the bed, putting back the curtain with no very gentle hand. He wanted to prove that she had lied; but the first look of the haggard, flushed face told him she had spoken the truth; his heart felt like lead within him, but his face was grimmer than ever.

"You are in bed betimes," he said, somewhat roughly, and then he dropped the curtain and sat down wearily on the edge of the bed.

"Perhaps so; you would be there too, if you had this pain," was the ungracious answer. It only needed a glance to see Nigel was in one of his worst humors.

"Hum! perhaps I might. Does your head ache, Nigel?"

"Confound your questions," pursued the other; "if you come up at this unearthly hour as a medical decoy-duck, I would thank you to go down again, and tell my mother I said so."

"Don't trouble yourself; I'll leave that to Murray. Of course you're ill again, and of course I am not surprised; seriously, Nigel, I would think twice about that farm."

There was a muttered something not very complimentary to Dr. Strath.

"I am speaking for your good. Sir William Travers would let you have it to-morrow. There is one going for a song—only capital required: take it, Nigel, and we shall see you an old man yet."

"Keep your advice to yourself," returned Nigel, in a displeased voice; "it is thrown away upon me, Norman Strath," and he flung himself restlessly back upon his pillow.

"Yes, it is thrown away, I know," replied Dr. Strath, in the same indifferent voice. He had never once taken his keen eyes off Nigel. "Some men would think even manual labour better than sitting still and crying for the moon. I should have thought you, for one, would have had enough of meddling with women."

Nigel looked at him, too astonished to speak.

"I know all about it," went on Dr. Strath; "don't flare out at me, Nigel: there can be no harm in your mother telling it, or my listening, I suppose. You are not fond of my advice generally, I know, but I recommend you to try and get over this as soon as you can; you have made a mistake."

"Mistake?" shouted Nigel.

"Yes, a mistake," repeated Norman, in the same cold tone; "and if Barbara is the girl I take her for, she will have nothing to say to you."

He had angled roughly in troubled waters, and the very roughness of his bait took; out it all came in an angry tide from Nigel's sore breast, the bitter, unpalatable truth; and Norman knew the man whom he loved as a brother, whom he had injured and sworn to cherish, was snatching his ewe-lamb from him, and his heart died within him and became as a stone.

"Nigel, I will hear no more."

"There is no more to say; you know it all now. Deride me, if you will but if I do not get her, I shall die."

"Then die," was on Dr. Strath's lips, but he forbore. "If you were like any other man," he said at length, "I should despise you for what you have said to me; but being what you are, good night."

"Is that the way you treat my confidence, Norman? are you angry with me?" and Nigel's

voice was faint as he spoke. "What is the matter?"

"There is nothing the matter," returned the other, with ashy lips, as he rose, and then he put his hand on Nigel's pulse. "Nigel, Nigel, how often have I warned you against those agitations; none but cowards are suicides, and this is suicidal. Lie still, I will not have you answer," and he stooped over and wiped the cold dews from Nigel's forehead as tenderly as a woman; "there, you are better now. You should not have talked like that, and over-excited yourself, when your pain was on you; it might cost you your life any day," and then he sat beside him gloomily awhile, till the faintness passed.

"I may go now?"

"Yes, you may go; but do not send anyone to me: I want to be alone. I am used to these attacks: you may think it folly, but they are worse since I have had this—this trouble."

"That is because you have not the manhood to bear it properly. I did not mean to be angry with you, Nigel; I believe you can't help it. There, we will say no more about it; you had better keep your confidences for your mother, another time. I only wish that one of us had never been born."

"Why do you wish that, Norman?"

"I think we were born to be soreness of eyes to

each other. I will think over what you have said; and, Nigel, do not despair."

"Do you think I shall have her yet?"

"You may; I can't tell. There, good night." His heart was dead within him, but he must not let himself think for a moment; he had a little work to do before that; he had a visit to pay on his homeward road, and then there was that good-night to his mother. There would be plenty of time presently to have it out with himself; he had not yet looked it in the face; he only knew that she had not lied, and that his heart was dead within him.

He sat a long time by a dying child, who would hold his hand to the last; it was a poor crippled boy, of whom he was very fond; he said a kind word or two to the stricken parents, and took a little sister on his knee to comfort her, and then he went home.

Late as it was, he knew he should find his mother up; he would have given much to have it otherwise, but he thought a brief word would content her, and put on as cheerful a look as he could muster.

But as he stooped over to kiss her, he saw that in her face that told of fresh trouble.

"You are late up to-night, mother."

"Yes, I am late up. Where have you been, Norman? It is twelve o'clock, is it not? and I have been sitting here waiting to speak to you."

"You have something to tell me, mother: it is no good news, I can see by your face."

"Yes, I have something to tell you, but I don't think it will get itself said to-night." Her voice shook, and he could see that her hand was closing and unclosing tremulously on an unsealed paper; she sometimes opened his business letters for him: this evening's post must have brought him ill news. For a moment he seemed as though he would put it from him, and then he held out his hand mutely; if he had to suffer, might it not be as well that it should come all at once on him? but, looking in his face, she saw that he had no suspicion of the truth.

"I do not doubt that you will bear it as a man," she said; "it is but a fresh beginning, and your hands are young and strong—I thank God for their strength. It is worse for the Doctor." Then he stooped and took it from her, turning his back to her as he read it, as though needing the light.

But he knew, before he touched it, what she meant, and that he was a stricken man.

She could only see the broad line of his shoulders; she rose and touched them softly. "Norman," she said; then he turned round and smiled at her, but his smile was awful.

"It is all over now with Barbara, mother; the game is played up."

"My dear!"

He struck the paper with his great hand, and then crumpled it into nothing and hurled it from him.

"It is only the poverty of Lazarus, minus his sores," he went on with a fierce laugh: "the poor have no need of wives; it is only a luxury for the rich. You must cast in your lot with me, mother; it is for the New World now. Those cursed mines!—if they had spared your annuity and the Doctor's grey head, I would have forgiven them."

She cast about in her mind for some word that might comfort him, but she could think of none; she would have caressed him, had he been a man that would have permitted such softness; her weak hand wandered lovingly over his coat-sleeve, but could find no resting-place; she would have liked to have crept closer to him in their trouble, and covered his face with her tears and kisses, but he could not have borne it.

"God is good," she said; and then her voice stammered and broke, and her knees trembled under her. "If you would only sit down and let us talk over this, Norman," she pleaded; but he would not.

"I cannot talk, mother," he returned, vehemently; "will talking mend our shattered fortunes?" and then as her patient grief smote him, "you must go to bed, mother, and pray for both of us, if you can; for I have that to face to-night, that might try any man's courage." Then she knew things were

desperate with him; she lingered by his side a moment with a whispered blessing, and went her way.

He was standing when she left him; but, as soon as she closed the door, he dropped into a chair, leaning his head upon his hand heavily, and there he sat till dawn.

"I have that to face that would try any man's courage," he had said to her, and he knew, as he said them, that it was the bitterness of death.

He was a poor man. The Spanish mines in which Dr. Heathcote had so largely invested, and had persuaded Norman to take shares, had proved the bubble of a mock company, which had suddenly burst, and engulfed them in ruin.

Every penny of his hoarded savings, the remainder of his mother's annuity, even the accumulated dividends, had been swept away: the only difference between his ruin and his partner's was that Dr. Heathcote's was more absolute; he had incurred larger liabilities, and as all his professional earnings were invested in different parts of the same concern, there was danger that he owed more than he would ever be able to repay. This was all that came of his long self-denial and devotion to a distasteful life —dislike, persecution, the slanders of an enemy, the weak credulity of village boors, poverty more intense than he had known for years, the crushing of all his hopes, and a long exile from all that he best loved.

He knew that he had lost Barbara; he knew before this last blow that he should give her up, when his heart had felt like a stone; but now this had sealed it. Had life ever been so hard to any man, as his was to him?

He had worked and toiled for his mother, that he might replace her in some of her former affluence, and he had only brought her to poverty; he had concealed his abhorrence of his narrow drudging existence, putting a good face on it, and burying his ambition out of sight, going out day by day to a monotonous round of village work, dealing tenderly with the poor, and bearing rough usage from the rich. How had he been rewarded? The bitterest slanders had been spread against him, and the very people whom he had most loved and cherished had believed them; he had offended their vulgar superstition, and they had accused him of such things as no man could bear; they had taken the bread from his lips, and now, when trouble had overtaken the man whom he most reverenced in the world, they had so crippled his strength, and weakened his hands among them, that he was the last that could offer to help him. He knew that his absence would be the best chance for his partner to re-unite the broken practice; and yet in his failing health how was that possible?

And lastly and worst of all, he had set his heart

on one whom in his ignorance he thought would find favor in no man's eyes. He had locked up his love for her in his heart so closely, that she had failed to guess it. And yet how he had worked for her! not David, when he went out to win his royal bride by the hundred foreskins, could have warred more mightily than he. From morning to night she had been his thought in long noontide rides and midnight watchings; he said to himself that the time had come for him to take his wife, and now this had come upon him: the boy whom he had so loved and injured, the boy whose life had been a weariness through his hand, whom he had sworn before his God to make happy, though it should be at his own cost, had spied out his treasure, and was sick with the longing to possess it. It was the morbid flaw in Norman's otherwise healthy nature, that he should think himself bound by this boyish vow; in the exaggerated view which he took of the injury he had done Nigel, he would know no exemption or dispensation from the cruel self-denial he meditated. He loved Barbara as his own soul, but he could not have married her: the remembrance of his broken vow would have seared and scorched him with a never-ceasing burning; it would have made his joy bitter to him. It was easier for him, with his stern sense of duty, to renounce all and go away, than it would have been

to take Barbara and live in sight of Nigel's agony. It may seem Quixotic overstrained generosity: I am only telling you what the man's nature was, and how he could not help what he did.

He loved Nigel, and he had sworn this thing concerning him. It never occurred to him that the man might release the boy's obligation; or if it did occur to him, he shuddered away from it. He remembered how he had knelt down beside his bed, and prayed that he might do something for Nigel's happiness before he died, and how he vowed that he would do it at whatever cost; he had sworn it not once nor twice: every time he looked at the wreck he had made—yes, even in after-years, when he remembered it, he had sealed it again and again; and now the light of his eyes was gone from him, and his life was barren of all joy. It never occurred to him to consider Barbara's happiness in this; he had long felt that she was to be won, but he little knew of the deep love that was stirred within her; he treated her reverent fondness for him as a girl's innocent fancy, but he had small hope that if both were offered her, that she could prefer him to Nigel, with his man's beauty and wealth; he could never have brought himself to believe that she had already refused him, for his sake. Lady Strath had kept that little episode to herself, and Barbara was never likely to tell him;

and so it came into his dull masculine reasoning that he had only to go away, for Nigel's claims to be preferred and accepted.

If he could have hesitated in this self-abnegation, the heavy losses he had incurred effectually prevented retreat; if he could have made up his mind to brave everything, he was as far from winning Barbara as ever. He knew that he was in the same position as when he first entered Sunningford, that with the broken practice his profits as junior partner were scarcely more than when he was the well-paid assistant; he had nothing to fall back upon; he would not be able to marry for years—perhaps never. Should he sacrifice Nigel, aye, and Barbara too, for the poor comfort of seeing her daily, and wearing his heart away with the desire to possess her? No; it was better to make a virtue of necessity, and leave Nigel to win and woo her, and forget that he had ever seen the face that was better to him than all beauty. She would have cared for him, if he asked her, he knew; but now he had only spoken a few vague words, which she had not seemed to understand.

He wondered what she would have said if she knew what he felt for her; and then he remembered how he had bidden her be faithful; and he thought he would say a word or two that should make her comprehend his changed position. She might not

have understood him, but nevertheless there must be no mistake; he would take some opportunity and tell her that he should never marry; it would allay any scruples that might arise in her mind, and leave her free to act as she chose. And then he thought what a grand thing it would be for her to marry Nigel,—how her fresh nature would strengthen and brace his; but it was not possible to follow out that thought, it made him so sick with pain. But Nigel was rich and generous; he would help them in this strait, and settle Leigh. Yes, it was all for the best," he sighed, and then he took a letter from his pocket and read it.

He had carried it about for days, though he knew it wanted an answer. It was another one from his old chum, Fred. Lisle, the same who had told him about that opening in New York. They were to buy a practice between them, just vacant by the death of an English doctor; this was now impossible for Norman Strath, but he knew of means for borrowing the necessary outlay. It was a daring speculation, but it promised to turn out well, and Fred. urged him to come at once; he had been so urging him ever since he heard of the Durnford troubles. Norman knew that Dr. Heathcote would be grieved to part with him, but he also knew that every day only increased their embarrass-

ment with regard to each other. Dr. Heathcote would soon be back among his patients; and now Dr. Strath was resolved on his emancipation. The doctor would be back at his work again; and there was a great dearth of labor. Why should he not go at once? He had few arrangements to make, few leave-takings; his mother might follow at her leisure, when he had got a place for her. "We must knock the nail on the head at once," wrote Fred.; "don't stand shilly-shallying with the old women at Durnford; break with the doctor,—trust me he will be too willing to let you go; get a relay of the necessary tin, and start by the next mail. There is a hint of opposition in this quarter from a thorough-bred Yankee. Come at once, like a good fellow, and start me out of my difficulties."

"There's nothing to be gained by waiting," said Norman, thoughtfully, as he laid down the letter. "I'll write for the money now, and to-morrow I'll speak to the doctor;" and then he got up and stretched himself and shivered, and walked slowly up and down in the grey morning light. He had a great deal to do before breakfast-time, but he got through it all, and had seen a patient besides; only when his mother sat down opposite to him, she thought he looked ten years older, and there was a hard bitter line round the mouth she had never noticed before.

CHAPTER V.

BARBARA'S TRIAL.

"In the cruel fire of sorrow
Cast thy heart; do not faint or wail;
Let thy hand be firm and steady,
Do not let thy spirit quail;
But wait till the trial is over,
And take thy heart again;
For as gold is tried by fire,
So a heart must be tried by pain."

Adelaide Anne Proctor.

THE same post that brought such bitter news to Norman conveyed the some disastrous tidings to Heathcote House, only with this difference, that the doctor had a few hours' reprieve.

Hester pondered long over the crabbed characters and yellow seal of the foreign-looking letter, before she decided that they should garnish her father's breakfast-table. The smeared superscription offended her. It is about those Spanish mines," she said, thoughtfully; "it will be sure to excite or trouble him;" and she determined that on no account should he have his night's rest broken.

She went to bed with a sensation of impending trouble, and was haunted by dreams of the yellow seal; it was always pursuing her, and exploding like a firework. She woke in a mental fog of vague surmises. With woman's instinct she instinctively guessed the truth; as she dressed herself, she made up her mind that the days were to be evil with them: they had always led the life of Damocles with respect to those mines; might it not be as well that their suspense should be ended?

She poured out the coffee lugubriously; when her father came down, she laid the letter on his plate without a word; there was a little joke on his lips as he opened it, but after the first few lines there was no more smiling. Such poverty had come upon him that any outcry might have been forgiven him, but such was not the doctor's way; he read it all through without comment, and when he had finished he took off his spectacles and wiped them carefully, his hands trembling very much during the operation, and then he sat silently before them all, stroking his grey beard with a terrible sadness in his eyes.

"Is there anything the matter, father?" asked Hester, anxiously: after all, the fate of Damocles was not a pleasant one. "It is not Don Lopez's handwriting I see, but all the same I am afraid it is about those mines."

"Why, yes, you are right there, Hester;" but the

doctor, as he answered her, avoided looking at his eldest daughter. "I am afraid it is a very bad piece of work after all, if I could only bring myself to believe what they tell me here;" and then he began again fingering the grey downiness of his beard.

Barbara glanced from one to the other impatiently. Hester's tone so plainly signifying, "I told you so," irritated her, as did her father's woe-begone perplexity.

"If anything has happened, of course Daddie will tell us," she struck in, in her bold young voice, and I don't know but what it is better to get the first plunge over; it seems to me as though all the troubles of Job have come upon us at once,—not but what he ended up very well, after all."

Dr. Heathcote shook his head with a groan. "Job's trials were not through his own fault, Barbara. When I look round on you all, I own my trouble is hard to bear;" then they knew where the sting lay.

And after that he told them, trying to word it so that he might make it plain to their womanly intelligences: they listened to him with little thrills of astonishment and horror, Barbara especially; but Hester, though she would feel any change in their circumstances more keenly than any one, was not disposed to lay aside that mournful glory that belongs to the true prophet: there was a certain

pride in finding that her words had come true, in spite of her genuine sorrow.

"O father! how I begged you to have nothing to do with those mines," she exclaimed, looking at him gloomily.

"Yes, you were right; you always are, Hester," returned the poor doctor, drooping his head; "but who could have thought that Don Lopez was a swindler?"

Barbara struck in again impetuously—

"I don't think it mends matters to bring up bygone warnings," she said, with a scornful look at Hester; "it only makes people more uncomfortable than they are. I don't believe we quite understand all Daddie has told us. How can shareholders be liable for more than they have paid?"

"Your dear mother always said that she could not understand business, and I am afraid you all take after her," replied the doctor mildly. "I suppose all women are the same. No, my dear," to Barbara, "you need not fear questioning me; I will try to explain all you wish;" but it was a longer business than even he had bargained for.

"Then those shares, for which you are liable, are not really yours?" asked Barbara at last.

"I imagined I had sold out: I know I intrusted Don Lopez with the business. It was to be a clear profit of hundreds; and the scamp has gone, and involved me deeply by buying others in my name,"

and he brought down his hand on the table heavily. "Does he know what he has done? The dishonorable villain, he has ruined me and my children!"

"Ruined, father?" said Barbara, turning pale at his vehemence.

"Ay, ruined! Is it not ruin when a man has to pay more than he has got? If I could clear myself and begin afresh, I think I could be happy. Old as I am, I could set to work with a will; but now——"

"Surely things cannot be quite so bad," said Hester, shrinking.

"To think that I have brought you to this poverty through my own fault!" he went on in a tone of misery, without heeding her; "and not only you, but Norman."

"Ah!" cried Barbara with a sudden start.

"But for me," sighed Dr. Heathcote, "that poor boy would have been prosperous; and now his little all is gone. He will be keeping his word now, and leaving me; and better too, perhaps. Oh, it is hard, very hard!" and then he checked himself, saying a word or two under his breath—"that the Lord had taken away!" Hester came a little nearer, and Connie kissed the grey head as she heard it.

"Leigh!" exclaimed Barbara, after a moment's silence, and then they all felt she had touched an old sore.

The doctor took down his hand from his

eyes, and looked at her mournfully, "Yes, there is Leigh—poor Leigh, he will feel it badly now; but we must lighten it for him: as long as we have a crust, my son and my son's wife must have half."

"Are they to come this afternoon, then?" hazarded Connie in the tone of one expecting a funeral.

"Yes, of course. Why should our boy be absent from us in our trouble? he will like to see the last of the old home." Then they knew what that terrible sadness in his eyes meant.

"Father!" ejaculated Barbara; but the doctor understood her.

"Yes; it has come to that. This home will fetch us money: it may clear us. Anything is better than dishonor. Your father's debts must be paid, remember." And then he looked round upon them one by one, as though to ask their pardon.

The sisters exchanged glances of horror. "Our home—Heathcote House! no, it will kill him: it must not be." Barbara shot out her sentences breathlessly, but the doctor did not hear her.

"Yes, I brought your mother here; she was a slim thing then, like our Connie, and not much wiser, as I often told her. Dear how the roses were out that day! It is hard to leave the house one's father's father has built; and then again he shunned that look at his eldest-born.

"But where are we to go?" cried poor Connie

with a sob. "You talk as though we had to starve, father: people will want doctoring as much as ever."

"Yes; but, if Norman's accounts are true, they prefer Murray's doctoring to ours. There are sad gaps in the visiting-lists. It is no good crying, Connie. My children are brave women, like their dear mother; and I suppose a lodging at Durnford will hold us and Leigh too."

"A lodging at Durnford?" Barbara could not help her aghast look at Hester; and Hester's countenance conveyed a whole unuttered jeremiad in return. It was almost too hard to believe, as their father had said; and then, remembering his recent trouble and feebleness, they tried to smoothe their perturbed faces as they answered him.

"Oh yes, Daddie, we see what you mean," said Barbara, brightly: "of course the money must be paid, whatever becomes of us; but something may be thought of without having to sell our home. But if we do, why, then we can try and be quite as happy in a cottage at Durnford."

"God bless my little daughter!" and then the doctor got up stiffly, feeling for his stick as he had not done for many a day.

"You are not going to leave us, dear father?" asked Hester gently, as she put it in his hand: "let one of us—let Barbara—sit with you."

"My dear," he answered, "you mean very kindly;

but I would rather be alone. You see, this has come upon me suddenly; and I am not very strong: I must think what is best for you all. Send Norman to me directly he comes;" and then he nodded round at them, trying to smile as he left the room.

"Hester, it will kill him," cried Barbara, with her eyes full of tears. "If it comes to this, that the house is to be sold, and we cooped up in a miserable lodging at Durnford, it will bring on another illness; and that will be the end of it."

"I really believe it," answered Hester in a voice of emotion; and then the three sisters linked arms together, as they went slowly down the lawn, the very magnitude of their trouble bringing them into closer union. Barbara, as usual, was spokesman; but round Hester there still lingered that sad glory of which we spoke.

They kept each other in sight all the morning, and made all manner of womanly lamentations; but Barbara never spoke the thoughts that were galling her. When she went upstairs to prepare for dinner, she looked them in the face for a moment with a quick shudder of dread. What change would this make to her new hopes, her two days' old treasure? Norman was poor now, as well as they; would poverty alter him? Could he, would he, be ever able to marry now; or would he go away, as he threatened, and leave them pinching and slaving in

a miserable lodging in Durnford, exposed to the gossips and pity of the Misses Macarthur and others of the same clique? How would life feel without him and Mrs. Strath? At this point of her soliloquy she saw such a scared face in the glass, and such blank misty eyes, that she started and pinched herself for selfishness, and came downstairs wondering what special sin had been theirs that such troubles had come upon them; and through the silent dinner, while Connie sat opposite, very red-eyed and with a large appetite, which she humored secretly, she wondered to herself whether she might be the domestic Jonah, and how soon it might accord with prudence to throw her out of the home-vessel.

She woke up at her father asking her to read to him. He looked jaded and inexpressibly weary; but there was a calmness, too, which he had lacked in the morning, as though he had found strength when he most needed it. Norman had not been near him, she found, to his increased uneasiness; and now he desired his daughters that all telling of Leigh should be reserved for himself.

Barbara read aloud most of the afternoon; afterwards they owned that neither understood the story in the least, but the effort soothed them; Leigh, entering, thought it was a very pretty family group he was disturbing.

"You have made it late, my boy," said his father.

"Is your wife there? She must excuse my rising; I am rather feeble to-day. Barbara, give your chair to Leigh's wife. Thank you for all your reading, my dear: a pretty book, but rather vague, don't you think? Connie, take off the cloak from Leigh's wife: she looks tired."

"No, not tired," faltered Ruth, timidly. Leigh interrupted her.

"Hillo, Con.! how long have you had pink eyes? Is that all for Sydney's *going*?—fortunate youth!"

"Oh, hush!" cried Connie, with a sound between a giggle and a sob. Barbara put her hands to her ears with a sense of jar and discord.

"Whew! Barbara looks as lachrymose as possible, too; what is the matter with the girls, father, they have made you as tired as themselves?"

"I think we are all tired, Leigh," replied Dr. Heathcote, with his sad smile. "I meant this to have been a happier coming-home for you, and you too, my dear," with a little old-fashioned bow to his daughter-in-law; "but we have had bad news this morning. Don't look at your sisters, poor things; they'll have enough to bear. It is all wrong with the Spanish mines, my son; Norman and I are the dupes of a mock company."

Leigh almost started from his chair; but at a sign from Barbara he restrained himself. A few forcible words from his father made him compre-

hend the state of affairs. Bab saw he grasped the sense of ruin in a moment; he looked almost sullen with grief as Dr. Heathcote spoke of the necessity of selling their house.

"And because there are not enough for you to work for, I have brought you another mouth to feed," he said, with a rueful glance at his wife. "It seems as though committing one fault is like sowing the ground with dragon's teeth, such consequences crop up on all sides."

"Never mind if they crop up ready to do battle for us," cried Bab, with an attempt at humor; "you must try and be brave, for father's sake, Leigh."

"Yes, we must strengthen each other's hands, my boy; remember, we have each something to forgive. I ought to have known better than to have put my family in such peril," he sighed heavily, and went on. "We must not distress your sisters or Ruth more than we can help. Take Leigh's wife to her room, my dear; Leigh and I will talk it over a little by ourselves."

They rose obediently, and he held out his hand to Ruth for a moment.

"You must not vex yourself, or look quite so sad about it, Ruth," he said, kindly; "the worst is, that you have married into a very poor family, and will have to rough it a little, like the rest of us."

"As if I should mind that," cried Ruth, with her

face kindling; then plaintively, "ah, if you would only let me work, I should be so happy, and a trouble to no one."

"You must not say that, my dear; we should not like Leigh's wife to work, should we, Hester? No, no; you are one of my daughters now, and I must take care of you;" and then he patted her hand, and let her go.

Hester showed her her pleasant rooms with mournful courtesy. "These are yours as long as we are here," she said, as she pointed out the different accessories for comfort. "If I had had a little longer time, I could have made them look better."

"I am sure they are beautiful," returned Ruth, trying to look grateful, but in reality unable to see anything for the fast-rising tears. "You must not think me indifferent or cold," she went on, struggling for composure; "but if you knew what I feel when I hear him so compassionate, and know what a burden we shall be! and he so old, and you will not let me work, any of you."

"Perhaps we may all have to work, Ruth," said Hester, kindly, touched at this real repentance. "I don't mean to say that we are not very sorrowful; but I think we must be brave, too."

"Ah, you are good — you have nothing to reproach yourself with: you have not that sense of wrong-doing that makes the heart heavy."

"No, neither have you," returned Barbara, quickly. "Nonsense! forgiveness is not an idle word;" then in a lower tone, "don't stain the blankness of the page; it is all white and fresh now."

Ruth held up her head, comforted; and then they all sat and talked together till it was time to go downstairs. I don't think men know the luxury and cosiness of women's grief. I am aware the sentence sounds oddly; but in all such community of sorrow there must be strength and comfort: there can be no hidden bitterness when one has talked out all one's grief.

Ruth had been a little consoled, and her calmness was restful to look at. Not so with Leigh; he was not good at hiding his feelings, and his face of profound wretchedness was a sore trial to his father and to them all; it was felt as a sensible relief by more than one, when Connie announced suddenly that Norman was in the surgery, and would be with her father directly.

Barbara shrank back into her dark corner at the far end of the room as he entered; she was glad that he could not see her face; and then she trembled all over, for fear he should pass her by. He was shaking hands with them all—yes—no—he had his back to her—he was gone. A little sound like a sigh came from Barbara, when all at once

a cold loose grasp fastened on her hand for a moment, and then he sat down by Dr. Heathcote.

She could not hear what her father said, or how he answered him, they had dropped their voices so low. Ruth came out of the circle, and Leigh took her place; by-and-by she went out on the terrace, and Hester and Connie joined her; they paced up and down before the dark windows, talking softly; no one noticed Barbara, hidden away in the corner. Dr. Heathcote raised his voice a little. "They think I am not here," thought Bab; and though it was bliss to her, poor child, to feel she was in the same room with him, she was far too honorable to enjoy her stolen sweets; she would not join the others,—she was in too highly wrought a mood for their talk,—so she took up her station at the hall window, where she had sat on the evening of St. Ronans accident, and felt herself a heroine.

The servant passed and repassed; the hall-lamp was lighted, the chilly moonbeams came and wrapped her round; she could hear Ruth going up to her own room, and Connie's sleepy good-night; but still she sat in the shadow of the old clock, looking out on the dark flower-beds, and waiting till he should come. She could not sleep till she had spoken to him—the remembrance of the loose cold grasp oppressed her; she would forget, for this night at least, her new hopes, and

what he was to her, and think only that he was Bab's friend, and that she was sorry for him. He came out at last, opening the door in his old abrupt fashion, Leigh following him; she shrank back behind the clock again,—she could not speak before Leigh. Hush! some one was calling him—his father—no, Hester; he must go now. "Good night, Norman; I recommend you to sleep on it," he called out, as he raced back into the room; and then, without waiting for her fresh timidity to return, she came out of her hiding-place straight towards him.

He was standing under the hall-lamp, drawing on his gloves with the air of a man who does not know what he is doing, his eyes bent to the ground, and a heavy frown on his brow; he did not even look up as she drew near—not till she timidly accosted him.

"Norman!" then how he started.

"You here, Barbara! How is it you are not in bed?—all the others are; what nonsense! and twelve o'clock, too." His voice was gruff, his manner almost ill-pleased, and something stern in his countenance made her heart sink; did he think her forward? was he angry with her? "Norman always looks cross when he is ill or unhappy," she said, to reassure herself; but her courage was oozing away, for all that.

Dr. Strath was not a prepossessing man at all times; there were some people who denied that he ever could be, but these were mostly his detractors. There was a wholesome strength and ruggedness about him that others rather admired; but it was certain that in some moods of mind, like the present, for example, he could look positively ugly; on such occasions there was a harshness and severity of exterior that would grate on you; the eyes, generally so kindly and wise, had a fierce trick with them, and the mouth would smile sardonically in the midst of his beard, which at such times was always in an uncouth state of roughness; no wonder Barbara's courage failed as she looked at him.

"It is such folly, people injuring their health in that way," he went on, pulling at his glove so quickly that it rent across his palm, at which piece of awkwardness he stamped his foot in an impatient manner.

"Give me the glove; I will mend it for you," said Bab gently, taking it from him. "You are always spoiling your gloves, Norman. I did not know it was so late; I was only waiting for a little while to say good night to you," she continued, with a quick blush at what her words implied.

"Good night," he returned ungraciously, not

seeing the blush; and he was positively turning from her, but she called him back.

"Oh, Norman, do let me say a word to you. I am so sorry, so sorry about all this trouble;" and her face was full of the sweetness of sympathy, as she held out her hand to him.

"Sorry—yes, we are all sorry, I suppose; but there's no use in crying over spilt milk, as I can see. We're all in the same boat, as it happens, too; and there's no knowing who will sink and swim among us all. I don't feel like swimming much, myself," he continued, with a harsh laugh; he had taken her hand, and was holding it without any pressure, and now she withdrew it in a hurt sort of way.

"Yes, we are all in the same boat," she returned, gravely; "but that makes it harder to bear, being so sorry for each other. It is not very pleasant to think, Norman, that we are the cause of your trouble," and her eyes brimmed over with unfallen tears.

"Tush, nonsense! what folly! It is all my own fault in allowing myself to be so gulled; there's the doctor asking my forgiveness, and all that sort of thing. Go to bed, and get this trash out of your head;" he still spoke roughly, but there was a gleam of kindness in his tone, as though he were scolding a refractory child.

"Very well," she returned, submissively, but with a face that went to his heart; "I only wanted to know how your mother was."

"I have scarcely seen her. How should she be? Just put everybody out of your head, and go to sleep. I shall be here early in the morning: there —good night;" but this time Barbara's hand was not ready for him.

"Good night," she answered, very sadly, and choking back her tears; and then he went. How was she to know that his heart was so heavy with sorrow, that he could have groaned aloud? she could only think how changed he was, how cold, how unlike himself. "I suppose it is because I do not understand men, not even Norman when he is in one of his moods. But I don't think I ever saw him quite like this before; can the loss of a little money have so hardened him? I think, in spite of his ridiculing the notion, he must be angry with us; or why should he speak so coldly of our being in the same boat, without one word of sympathy? Oh, if Norman changes to us," sighed Bab, wearily, "I think it will be more than I can bear. I could almost believe to-night that it was all my fancy, and that he does not love me at all; suppose he does not, suppose he goes away and leaves me: people don't die of broken hearts now-a-days—I know I'm not of the right stuff for it, anyhow; but

oh dear! oh dear!" and all the dreary conjecturing went on till Bab forgot her troubles in sleep, or lived them over again in her dreams.

She came down late the next morning, and the first thing she heard was, that her father was with Norman in the surgery. On coming in from a ramble in the garden a little later, she was told that the horses had been ordered, and that they had ridden off together. Norman had sent word to Hester that he would take great care of Dr. Heathcote, and that they would probably not be home to lunch, but that he would have refreshment at one of the farm-houses: which message set Hester's mind quite at rest. It was indeed time that Dr. Heathcote should show himself to his patients, but not the less did she dread the long rides for him till he was stronger. Connie, who had been paying one of her peeping visits to the surgery, now volunteered the information that something unusual must be going on: not only the day ledger, but all the big books had been taken down; there were rough estimates of accounts in Norman's handwriting; Norman looked as surly as a bear: perhaps they had dissolved partnership; for which unguarded remark Barbara could have boxed her ears.

Barbara was in one of her fretful humors, and could settle to nothing; she would not join the others in the harlequin-room, where Hester was

teaching Ruth lace-work; they were growing so confidential over it, that they would only have provoked her jealousy. If she could have sought her beloved pine-woods it would have been better, but she would only have been made miserable by her dread of meeting St. Ronans; the idea of resuming her painting without him was simply odious; to-day more than ever she felt how she would miss him and his ready sympathy. There was nothing for it but to betake herself again to the garden, and sit and fan herself with her broad-brimmed hat under her favorite elm-tree and snub Ben, and think what a wretched thing existence was, after all. It was rather a deteriorating occupation, and only served to depress her more. It was rather a relief when advancing shadows made her conscious of human proximity; it would be quite a pleasure to speak crossly to somebody: to whet the tongue sometimes makes the heart less sore, thought Bab; if it could only be Connie! She raised her eyes, and then she would have given anything to be in the drawing-room safe under Hester's wings,—in the pine-woods anywhere; for could it be? yes, it was St. Ronans himself walking quietly up the shady side of the lawn. She watched him quite fascinated; she almost felt unable to move in her surprise. Yes, there was the slouching felt hat, and the velvet coat he would persist in wearing; she could almost see the

loose fall of his collar, with the eternal blue knotted handkerchief. She was afraid, yes, she was afraid he limped more; and the little cane in his hand was new to her. No, there was no escaping,—he saw her now. What a goose she had been not to slip behind the summer-house, and so into the shrubberies! it would have been ignoble, but safe. How were they to meet after that awkward scene? Oh, it was too bad of him to follow her like this; and her face glowed hotly at the remembrance of his last words. "How handsome, how well he looks!" she said to herself before she shyly cast down her eyes. It was no good; she felt she never had any dignity to speak up. She must stand up there like a bashful school-girl with only one idea uppermost, and that to get away from him as soon as possible. She only wished she could control that rebellious color of hers,—it might mislead him; and oh, if she could only not stammer!

But nothing could exceed the easiness of St. Ronans' greeting: it was as impossible for him to be awkward, as it was for Barbara to look dignified; the sensation was unknown to him. He wore his unlucky character of rejected suitor as gracefully as he would his accepted honors. There was nothing to distress Barbara in his frank greeting, though he threw her one of his keen looks to begin with.

"How delightful it is out here! I never loved anything so much as this old garden; to my mind it

beats the fir-plantation hollow; those trees have the growth of years. Hester told me where I might find you; she looks harassed, poor girl, and no wonder;" here he sighed. "May I sit down on this step beside you, Barbara, or shall I dispose of myself lower on the turf?"

"Whichever you like," returned Barbara, stiffly, his perfect ease making her feel angry with herself and him; if this was the way he could meet her after what had passed between them, the sooner she brought it to his recollection the better; "whichever you like," she repeated in her cool fashion: "for myself, I was just going in." Then his voice changed.

"Going in! nonsense, Barbara; do you know I have come all this way to speak to you?"

"We can speak quite as well indoors," she replied, hurriedly leading the way thither. "I have left Ruth too long alone as it is—it is her first day here; and poor Hester must be tired. You will find your sofa in its old place, St. Ronans, if you would like a rest after your walk."

She was taking him then into the thick of them; she thought the presence of her sisters would be a check on him. She had reckoned without her host: he was getting vexed now; but nothing could exceed the smoothness of his words.

"Hester and Mrs. Leigh are there, I suppose you know, Barbara?"

"Yes, of course; they will be very glad to see you, St. Ronans," she returned, forcing him with his tired limb painfully to keep up with her; but just then prudence was prevailing over pity.

"Oh, very well, I thought you did not know: of course, if you do not mind, it is nothing to me. I shall say what I've come to say, if it were in the presence of a hundred witnesses: you know me well enough to be sure of that, Barbara."

Was he threatening her? She faced round upon him perfectly scarlet.

"You'll say what you've come to say; whatever do you mean by that, St. Ronans?" but her heart misgave her as she put the question.

"There, I thought you would be reasonable: it would not be very pleasant for you to hear, or me to tell, this sort of thing before Hester. Dr. Heathcote might be different; but till you let me speak to him, I think we had better keep our little affairs to ourselves. A man does not like to be reminded before witnesses that he has been refused," he continued, a little sadly, "and I think you are far too generous to wish any such telling."

"Of course I have kept my own counsel," she returned, proudly; she was standing still when she had put that question to him, and now she was still pausing in irresolution.

"It is not because you have said me nay, that we

should cease to be friends," he said, watching her; "I don't think you need fear trusting yourself to St. Ronans."

"Not to St. Ronans," she replied, with meaning emphasis.

"Well, it shall be as you wish. Look here, Barbara, I'll never worry you to call me Nigel again;" then as she started joyfully, as though attaching more meaning to his words than he intended, "I don't say that I shall ever give up loving you, or wishing you to be what I asked you,—that would be impossible; but just now I want you to forget that I am anything but Bab's master, your old friend St. Ronans, who has come to hear all about this sad trouble that has befallen you."

His frank kindness touched her to the heart; he had not intended it, but it was misleading her. "How generous, how self-forgetful, how truly noble he is!" she said to herself, as she suffered him to retrace their steps; and then the thought of Norman's coldness crossed her.

"Bab has missed her master," she said, in a softer tone than she ought to have used, though she spoke in the innocence of her gratitude.

"It is only two days; has it seemed so long?" returned Nigel, in surprise; but his manner was joyful, and Barbara felt she had been indiscreet.

She resolved to be more guarded—rather a difficult

task with our simple Barbara; but the pleasure of telling her sad tale and all her fears, the refreshment of his warm sympathy, and the delight of feeling she might keep him as a friend, all contrived to throw her off her balance. Never very good at concealment, Barbara soon betrayed to Nigel's watchfulness, how much honest affection was lavished on him; he had no idea that she had really cared for him so much; it was not the right kind, and she had refused him very decidedly, and almost with gestures of horror; but Barbara was like no other girl; might it not be that she was loath to entertain these ideas at all? She had always seemed singularly untamed in these things, and rather savage in her simplicity; perhaps the thought of a lover displeased her,—it was new and repellent, she did not know her own mind; the doubt charmed him; his eyes brightened with fresh life as he listened to her. It was such wonderful happiness to be hearing her voice again, that he could not bring himself to interrupt her, even by a word, not till she mentioned the lodgings at Durnford, and then he started up with a gesture of annoyance.

"What, sell your house and take lodgings at Durnford! nonsense, Barbara; are you dreaming or mad? The idea is preposterous; why Leigh would be ready to cut his throat with *ennui* before a month was gone."

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"I know it will be very bad for him," she answered, sadly; "he is so restless."

"Restless, I should think so; who proposed this Utopian scheme for the happy family? Leigh would feel himself in a cage, and commence gnawing his bars through at once; come, Barbara, you are too sensible to entertain such a notion seriously; why he would be quarrelling with you all, and sick of his own wife, before you had been many weeks together; if you have any wish for your father's or Leigh's happiness, or even for your own, you will do your best to prevent such an arrangement."

"I—what have I to do with it?" faltered poor Barbara; "if you only heard the miserable way in which Daddie will talk of sharing his crust with his son and his son's wife. I don't like the idea of a crust, St. Ronans."

"Things can't be quite so bad as all that," returned Nigel, incredulously.

"Oh, but they are," she assured him; and thereupon followed the dismal schedule of debts, that she had gleaned from her father's lips. "I don't know but what a lodging in Durnford and a butterless crust may be very dreary, but any debt or dishonor would be worse."

"Far worse," assented St. Ronans; and then he dropped his head on his hand again and remained silent. Barbara subsided into dreariness.

The silence was growing irksome, when, turning her head, she found that he was watching her with one of his keen looks.

"Don't you think it is time we go in, St. Ronans?" she suggested, rather hastily.

"Nearly time; but don't move just yet, Barbara. I would rather not say what I am going to say before Hester;" then she settled herself, dumbly, feeling that he was too much for her.

"I don't want to offend you again," he said, somewhat hesitatingly. "Sometimes I think I was too hasty with you last time, and frightened you with my roughness; was it so, Barbara?" waiting for her to speak, but Barbara would not answer.

"I took you by surprise," he went on; "sometimes I think it was not quite manly of me, but you know my hot temper. I ought to have given you time to think over what I was saying; I will never be so hasty again with you, Barbara." He drew a little nearer to her as he spoke, and went on earnestly, "I cannot take back what I said then. I want you to consider it quietly at your leisure: think what it is to be the dearest in all the world to such a man as I. I cannot tell how it has happened, but you are beautiful in my eyes."

"St. Ronans, if you talk like this, I shall go in to Hester."

"You would not be safe even under her wing,

little bird. Ah! I have you there: now you must listen to me. Don't look so frightened, Barbara, see how gentle I am; it is St. Ronans who is talking to you all this time, remember."

"You know you have me in your power," she returned, angrily; she was wounded at his persistent persecution, fearful of what he might say next; he was making her cowardly with that strong will of his. "I shall know how to trust myself again with you, St. Ronans," she finished, with an attempt at dignity.

Nigel put down the attempt with quiet ease. "Do not distress yourself," he returned, soothingly; "I will say what I have come to say, and then you shall go free. I knew pretty well the position of affairs before you began to talk, only I hardly thought they were quite so bad. Look here, Barbara, you refused me, I know; you are not likely even now to marry me for your own sake, or mine either, though any other woman must be won by such devotion, but at least I can ask you to marry me for your father's sake."

Then she hid her face, that he might not see its sudden paleness. "And not only for his sake, but for Leigh's," he went on, now speaking very low; "have you ever thought what I can offer you? You did not think it worth your acceptance then; think over it well before you push away the

only hand that can help you and yours in your trouble."

"If I am to help them by telling a lie," she said, lifting her head proudly, "I would rather they starved;" but the mild reproach of his look disarmed her.

"Am I asking you to tell a lie? Do you dare to avow in all honesty that you have no sort of affection for me—none?"

Then in her truth she answered him—

"I will never say what is untrue. I do love you, and very dearly, too, St. Ronans. A girl might give her brother what I give you, but it will never be a different sort of love—never."

"You think so now," he answered, quietly. "You are mistaken, Barbara; many a girl has married feeling no more fondness for her future husband than you feel for me. What if I am content to receive what you can give me?"

She shook her head in mournful denial.

"But I am. Listen to me, Barbara. Only three words, 'I am yours, Nigel,' and every debt from these miserable shares shall be paid, and Heathcote House yours for ever. Don't look at me like that. Ah! if you loved your father, if you had but one spark of the generosity that I thought was in your character, you would be ready to do more than this, rather than see him go forth to his death."

"Nigel Strath, you shall not make me suffer like this—cruel, cruel!" and Barbara broke out into a perfect passion of tears; but he saw softening in them, and would not spare her.

"I am only telling you the truth. Ask any one—ask Norman, if the break-up of the home which he has lived in all his life will not kill him: another stroke, at least, must be the result of such agitation. Oh, Barbara! I never thought that the doctor's little daughter could so harden her heart against her father; how often I have heard you speak of Jephtha's daughter as your favorite heroine, and scoff at the idea of love without sacrifice."

He was pricking her to the quick; in her terror at his words, her very resolution seemed wavering. He was using his power ungenerously, but that it was power, was certain; if she could only have checked her tears to answer him, but she could not. It was in her heart to tell him about Norman, but the name would not have got itself said.

"I wish I could spare you this suffering," he went on, "but I cannot; it is life and death to me—remember that. But if you cannot do it for your father's sake, do it at least for Leigh; think twice before you doom him to such an existence when a word would save him."

"I will not speak the word," she sobbed out, passionately.

"No, you will not; you are strengthening yourself in your selfishness, I see that clearly. Barbara, you are disappointing me: I thought you so noble that you would almost have laid down your life for your brother's sake."

"You would have me do evil that good may come; you are a merciless tempter, St. Ronans."

"There can be nothing evil in blessing three lives, Barbara. Women make these sort of sacrifices every day, and with less truth than you. Remember Leigh's whole future hangs on your decision: your father is old, and a few years of more or less comfort may not matter to him; but think of Leigh's youth, of all his brightness worn away by drudgery. Only speak the word, Barbara, and a partnership in a merchant's house shall be offered to him, and, before many years are out, he will be on his way to honest wealth and independence."

She had heard him out, but the misery on her face might have touched a heart of stone; it struck Nigel even with remorse.

"Forgive me, Barbara," he said, taking her listless hand; "I know I have pained you; but I could not see you throw away all these chances of happiness for the want of a little thought. Think over what I have said: this day week I will come to you for your answer;" then he rose from the grass, and took up his hat from beside her.

"Good-bye," he said, still lingering. "Will you not tell me you forgive me this apparent cruelty?"

"No, I cannot bring myself to say that. I thought you more generous, St. Ronans. Oh dear! oh dear!" A fresh burst of tears impeded her utterance; and when she could check them sufficiently to look up, he was no longer beside her; she could see him slowly threading the winding shrubberies. Gone! when she meant to tell him what was in her heart, and why she could never give him a different answer. "Oh, it is very hard," cried poor Barbara. "Why did he—why did he—tell me that? How am I ever to be happy now, whichever way it is? And perhaps after all Norman does not care for me—he was so cold, so unkind, yesterday. I am getting afraid of St. Ronans, too; he will make me do things against my will; he takes no refusal. Oh, Daddie, Daddie, what shall I do? Was there ever such a miserable creature in existence as your poor Bab!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE CLOUDS DEEPEN.

"Oh, for comfort! Oh the waste of a long doubt and trouble!
On that sultry August eve trouble had made me meek;
I was tired of my sorrow. Oh, so faint, for it was double
In the weight of its oppression, that I could not speak."

Jean Ingelow.

THE next two or three days were days of wretchedness to Barbara: do what she would, she could not get St. Ronans' words out of her head; if he had wished to punish her for her obstinacy to his suit, he could not have found out a way to render her more truly miserable. The strongest part of Bab's nature, as I have said before, was her love for her father and brother, and Nigel had not over-estimated her generosity, in supposing her capable of any sacrifice for their sakes; nothing but that obstinate truthfulness of hers, and those few poor words of Norman's, prevented her from yielding to his temptation; but as yet she never hesitated. "I will be faithful to him, as long as he wants me," she said, pressing her little hands to-

gether convulsively; "till I know from his own lips that he does not care for me, and never means to be anything but Bab's friend, I will not listen to St. Ronans. Ruth has done wrong, and Hester, and I was for blaming them both, and no wonder; but sometimes I think I shall have a harder fight than either of them," in saying which Barbara unconsciously spoke the truth.

She held herself much aloof from the home circle at this sad time, which brought down on her many a rebuke from Hester, but the rebukes were milder and more wholesome than they used to be. Barbara would hear them out silently, and then go and sit by her father; she still did her duty to him very sweetly, but there was a heaviness in her whole aspect that made his heart ache; she had the air of one who did not quite know what she was about—a lost, "verloren" sort of manner. Her hair rippled quite fiercely over her forehead just now; her great eyes seemed to challenge every one that approached her. "Dame Muffet is in one of her black fits," Leigh observed shyly; but Bab only shrugged her shoulders at him, for, in sorrow and out of sorrow, Bab was ever tricksy.

One afternoon, about three days after her last interview with St. Ronans, she went down to Oakleigh Cottage; she had been shunning Mrs. Staith of late, with a curious consciousness that she

could never be at her old ease with her, but her anxiety to hear about Norman put this feeling aside; she had never seen him once since the night he had been so brusque with her; she could not get it out of her mind, that perhaps he was avoiding her. Hester had had long talks with him in the surgery, and Connie too. Barbara had never ventured on such debatable ground, but she could not keep away from the cottage any longer.

Her friend received her with open arms; if she wondered what had become of her, she did not say so; her kindness was humiliating, so much was she disposed to kill the fatted calf for the truant; she unbonneted her with her own hands; Barbara had to submit to be kissed and made a fuss over, while the gentle hands coaxed and managed the rebellious hair.

"You may as well leave it alone, Mrs. Strath; it will persist in standing all on end, and going just the wrong way. I think it sympathizes with me," sighed poor Bab; and then Mrs. Strath looked kindly at her, telling her that she was getting pale and thin; and then taking the girl's hand, led her into her pleasant shady room, and made her sit down in her old place.

"Nest was here just now; she is almost as much a stranger as you are, Barbara, Geoffrey takes up so much of her time now. I don't have as much of

my adopted daughters as I used to have;" she finished with one of her fond smiles. Barbara did not say much in answer, her heart was too sore; she was in the place where she most loved to be, but it might have been the stool of repentance for all the comfort it yielded her: it fretted her to see Mrs. Strath's jaded look; her questioning, gentle as it was, harassed her into abruptness, and even her sympathy failed utterly.

By-and-by she began to question in her turn, and then she almost wished she had held her tongue, in her dismay at what Mrs. Strath had to tell her. Mrs. Strath cried a good deal over her narration, with the quiet subdued tears of age, and was very pitiful over herself and Barbara, breaking off with tender little exclamations and embraces, with all of which Barbara could have dispensed in her fretted excitement.

Yes, it was all settled; did not Barbara know that? She was getting too old now to begin life afresh, and such a life; it was banishment, exile! Was it likely that she would ever see England and Sunningford again? The tears furrowed her cheeks at this juncture; Barbara kissed them away, rather impatiently, it is true, and begged her to go on; the poor child was heart-sick with suspense.

Well, the partnership was dissolved by mutual consent, she continued. Norman had talked Dr.

Heathcote into it; he had been taking him round to his patients, and he had gleaned such facts during his visits, had heard such dissatisfaction expressed, and seen such open dislike of Norman, that he owed it to his own family to accede to his request. Curiously enough, the partnership deeds had never been completed, owing to the sudden death of Dr. Heathcote's solicitor; they were to be signed that very day when the doctor was taken ill: so there was no difficulty. Norman owned that he had never liked the place or the people; their ignorance galled him, and he had no mind to put up with their ingratitude. The doctor was strong enough now to resume his own practice—that was, as much of it as Murray left him: he was so down and broken that a little opposition might do him good. Norman had settled everything with Fred Lisle. Fred was to find the necessary money, she did not know how; and he was only waiting till a good assistant should be found; but as he had heard of one to-day likely to suit, she was afraid that the reprieve would be a short one.

Barbara sat as quiet as she knew how; but every trace of color left her face, till Nigel Strath's name was mentioned, and then she flushed up, rather to her friend's surprise. "Nigel had been to Oakleigh Cottage yesterday, looking as ill as possible, but full of generous projects for Norman; he wanted to lend him money, buy him a London practice, or do

anything that one cousin might do for another, but Norman had refused everything; he had been positively ungracious to Nigel, bearing himself as though injured by his munificent offers, he would hardly listen to him; Nigel had gone away quite hurt. It was evident, though Mrs. Strath forbore from open blame, that she was secretly chagrined at her son's conduct; as usual, he had not treated her to a thorough confidence; she thought him inconsiderate in his arrangements for her; two or three times she let drop that she could not understand him at all.

"It is a long voyage to take by myself, my dear," she said plaintively, "but Norman will not hear of my accompanying him; he is in a terrible hurry, to be sure. They both say I must not come till they have a house ready to receive me; but I don't like to think of Norman roughing it without me, and no one to darn his socks, and no money to buy new ones; and then there are his collars, and his dinners, and the airing of his bed: he has always had his mother to see after these things;" and at this confession of her trouble, the good lady sighed heavily.

Something more than socks and collars stuck in Barbara's throat at this minute—honest anger, a sense of unmerited treatment, and above all a terrible feeling that she was mistaken in Norman; he was

harder than she thought him. This did not look like love; what a miserable fool she had been! After all, St. Ronan's was more generous: the man who loved her was weighing heavier in the balance than the man whom she loved; a little more, and she would be fighting against her own truth, as though it were her enemy. Jenny came in to lay the table, at which the two women started apart, as though they had been discovered in a crime, and Mrs. Strath smoothed her face and spoke pleasantly to her little handmaiden; but she was still on the subject of the fatted calf, and brought forth the remnants of the seed-cake with melancholy gusto. Barbara was in no mood for the cosy tea-table, but her denials were overruled. "Do stay, my dear, just to please me," said her friend persuasively. "Norman won't be in, and we shall have it all to ourselves; who knows how many more afternoons we may have together? Bring in the brown Windsor pears and the apricot jam, Jenny; and put Miss Barbara's chair to the table."

"Norman won't be in," was a stronger argument than the brown Windsor pears, and Barbara Heathcote yielded at once with just sufficient reluctance to enhance Mrs. Strath's victory; her heart was very soft over the girl's wilfulness and silence; nevertheless Barbara felt herself injured, when five minutes afterwards Norman entered, and though his

mother's surprise at seeing him was genuine, she chose to consider herself caught in a trap.

He gave an involuntary exclamation when he saw Barbara, though he tried to suppress it: Oakleigh Cottage was the last place where he expected to see her just now. Barbara chose to ignore the exclamation; but, under her sulkiness, her heart was thumping like mad.

He sat down opposite to her, and looked at her wistfully; the paleness, the big eyes gleaming out of the forest of ripples, the wayward and sorrowful curves of the mouth, smote him to the heart with a fresh pain. "Had she suffered as well as the rest of them?" He hoped not; but yet mute evidences of such suffering were there, kept in check, as usual, by a fretful humor; he had to subject her, it might be, to a fresh trial; it would be better for her, and for him, too, that he should speak to her and get it over; he must tell her, once for all, that he should never marry, and then any feeling she had for him would be nipped in the bud; he should see better, when he spoke to her, whether there was any such feeling. He sat casting kindly sad glances at her; his mother saw them, and was comforted; it would all come right with them now, she thought. There was very little conversation between the three.

"Have you mended my glove, Barbara?" he asked, with an attempt of his old light manner; "it

was an odd idea of mine putting them on at twelve o'clock at night, was it not? and they were new ones, too; how long had you been hiding behind that clock-case?" but Barbara would have nothing to do with such mournful rallying.

"Yes; I have finished your glove," she returned, very gravely. "Did not Hester give it you? Mrs. Strath, if we have finished tea, I will go home." She was choking with anger and sorrow over every morsel she took, and he was trying to rally her.

"If you are going home," returned Dr. Strath, "I think I will walk with you; it is early yet, Barbara—hardly six, I believe;" then his mother interposed, with urgent pleas that she should stay; but this time Barbara's resolution was not to be shaken. She did not want Norman to walk with her; but he might do so, if he liked. He was going to tell her that he was leaving Sunningford; very well, she would betray no feeling, if she could help it; if such hardness could be his, she would be very careful not to humiliate herself in his eyes; some word she would speak of indignation at his so acting, and that would be all: an evil pride was creeping on her, giving her a false support in her trouble.

"I am glad Norman is going with you," said Mrs. Strath, kissing her.

"He can do as he likes," returned Barbara, with

one of her wilful looks. Dr. Strath was holding open the gate for her to pass, but, with a curious revulsion of feeling, she lingered a moment to pick a late-blooming rose—one of Norman's favorites; before her walk was over, she had pulled it to pieces in her restless hands.

He turned round abruptly on her, the moment they were in the road.

"Barbara, have you and my mother been talking?"

"Talking! Well, I suppose so," replied Barbara, with an odd laugh; but Norman did not join in it.

"And she has told you about my going away?"

She signified her assent.

"It seems sudden, does it not? But I have been thinking over it a long time; circumstances have decided me. I can't stay on here, now they have taken the bread out of my mouth."

Barbara remained silent; he should draw no look or word from her, that should oppose his going; of that she was determined.

"Perhaps I might have borne even that," he went on, "if they had not taken it out of my mother's mouth too; then it was not possible to stand quietly by and endure seeing it."

"Yes, it is very hard for you; no wonder you are angry with us," she agreed, wilfully misconstruing

his meaning; but he interrupted her in some surprise.

"Nonsense! what are you talking about, Barbara? Why should that make me angry with you, of all people?"

"Why, of course it is all Daddie's fault," she answered, simply; "he was very wrong about those mines." Then he bade her very sharply hold her peace, but his look belied the roughness of his words.

"You ought not to refer to this again, when I bade you not," he said, somewhat more gently. "Women wage such mischief with their tongues. You know I alluded to Murray and the Durnford doings, when I spoke of the bread being taken out of my mouth. It is only fair to your father, and to you all, that I should leave him unhampered by my presence. I verily believe that, as things are going on now, they would ruin him if I were to remain; some of them hate me like poison."

"I should not wonder," returned Barbara, quietly; at which answer he flushed up angrily.

"I don't know what I have done but good to them," he exclaimed, in some bitterness. "Are you going to turn against me, too, Barbara?"

"No; you are too good for them," she said, with a quick impulse of pity, as she thought of his wasted life.

"Then you think I am right in making my way elsewhere? You think I am right, Barbara?" he repeated, as Barbara maintained a steady silence.

"No," was the cold, uncompromising answer; "I think you are wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Yes, quite wrong. Why do you ask me, Norman? you do not care for my opinion—I don't think you ever did. Bab is no longer the little friend to you that she used to be."

"Not my friend, Barbara?"

"No; friends are treated with confidence. Why did you never tell me that you were going away, Norman? Why did you leave me to guess it by accident; that is being as a stranger, not a friend."

"I am telling you now," he returned, quickly.

"Yes, you are telling me now—now, when I must hear it. I suppose you thought that I should not approve of your plans?"

"It is sufficient that my conscience approves," he replied, somewhat haughtily.

"Ah! your conscience. I wonder if you will care to hear how you have disappointed me," she went on, in a sad voice that thrilled him. "I thought you were one of a thousand, Norman. I should have said that you were the very last to

shirk difficulties, to turn your back on your enemies because you were too cowardly to face them."

"You are judging me charitably, Barbara."

"No, I never was charitable, but I must speak the truth. Why are you going away, but because you have no patience to stay and suffer? The fight is a degrading one, I know; it is all against poor ignorant people. You are angry with them, Norman, and they don't know any better. If I were you, I would rather starve than go away, leaving such a slur upon my name."

"You forget my mother," he said, moved by her arguments.

"No, I do not forget her. She would rather have the humblest lodging in Durnford than follow you to that great strange city: it is cruel to her at her age, and you should not ask it."

"She can remain in England," he replied briefly.

"What! remain without you? Pray do not wound her by hinting at such a thing. No, you know your own mind best," she went on, with a return of the old proud manner: "I ought not to have said all this."

"No, I don't think you ought, Barbara; you are only making it harder for me—when I am doing it for all your sakes, too."

"If you are doing it for our sakes," she said very softly, and looking up at him, "had you not better

reconsider it? We don't like to part with you, Norman, that is the truth. Daddie is getting old and unfit for work, and there is no dependence on Leigh. When this absurd prejudice has worn off, you might be everything to him: we are sure he will fret when you are gone."

"If I really thought I could help you by remaining," he said in such a hesitating voice that she thought he had wavered; "but no, I should only work mischief. I have thought it all over, night and day: the greatest kindness I can do for you is to go."

"But, Norman!"

"Hush! child, hush! you do not know, you cannot judge; how can a girl like you put yourself in my place? I tell you, I am doing my duty, and that my conscience upholds me; don't make it too hard for me to follow its dictates."

"I am not going to say any more," she returned sullenly, and then it was that she commenced pulling her rose to pieces; what were Norman's roses to her now, when he was going away? They had passed the green door in the wall a long time, and now she signified, somewhat peremptorily, that they should go back. Then he took her hand.

"You are not angry with me, dear child? I never found any eloquence so hard to withstand as yours, Barbara."

What did that matter, she thought, so that he did resist it?

"I cannot bear to think that you misunderstand me," he went on: "things would be so much easier if I could explain them to you. I have a very sad weight at my heart, that no one must know,—not even my faithful little friend, Barbara."

"A secret, Norman?"

"A secret—well, yes; but it does not sound much in the telling. Many years ago—so many that I cannot count them, I made a promise—a foolish sort of promise it was, but unfortunately I said it in my prayers; I was a boy then, remember, but I promised that if ever it were in my power to do a kindness to a certain person, I would do it; well, the time has come."

"Has this kindness, this promise, to do with your going away?"

"Certainly."

"And it is in your power to do it?"

"In my power, yes; but it is not easy; I may say that it is very difficult. Now you know why you make it hard for me."

"I will not," she returned regretfully; "why did you not tell me this before? Is it this that has made you look so stern and sad, so unlike yourself, Norman? It was very wrong to make such a promise: how would you know that circumstances

might not prevent you from fulfilling it? Is there no other way of keeping your word than by going to America?"

"It makes it easier for me if I do go away," he replied in a stifled voice. "Don't let us talk any more of it; it has changed my whole life so much, that I cannot bear to think about it. I do not know whether I owe it to you, Barbara, but I owe it to my own conscience to tell you that I shall never marry."

A quick-drawn breath, and then Barbara was herself again, but there was not a grain of color in her face. It was all a mistake, then!

"I once hoped it would be otherwise;" Barbara gave a low sigh of relief; "but now I know it is impossible. We have been such dear friends, Barbara, that I felt I must tell you this,—that you, of all others, ought to know it. Do you understand me, dear child?"

Then she knew that he meant to tell her that he had so loved her, but that all such loving must be over. It must be a cold sort of love, she thought, that could speak to her like that; it sounded oddly, after Nigel.

"Do you understand me?" he asked again, this time almost severely.

"I don't know—I suppose I do; you mean that you had hoped one day to have a wife?"

"Yes, and that, for many, many reasons, I shall never have one now,—never, Barbara!"

"I understand you, Norman," she said, quite calmly, considering the lump in her throat.

"I see you do. You are a brave child—a dear child, Barbara. I never met with such truthfulness as yours—never. I wonder how we shall meet again; suppose——" but then he stopped, and such a gleam lighted up his eyes; suppose, after all—in spite of all his treatment of her—she were to remain faithful to him—suppose she would not marry Nigel—would not his vow be rendered void by a year or two's absence? Certainly it would: if she were not married within two years, he must come back to her; and at this thought all his ruggedness and severity softened in a moment.

"You will not forget your old friend Norman?" he said, aloud.

"Of course I will not forget you," she returned, in the same quiet voice, but her eyes looked reproachfully at him: if he had only not said that, she could have forgiven him, but he was too much absorbed in his own pain to spare her.

"No, I knew you would not. God bless you, dear, for all the happiness you have given me. I never thought to be talking to you like this—but—but——" He struggled with some powerful emotion for a moment, but not successfully, and then he remem-

bered Nigel; was he acting quite fairly by him? Was he not leading her to suspect more than he had intended? He must still say a word or two that would leave her free to accept Nigel, if she chose; and he cast about in his own mind for a speech that would not cost him too dearly.

"Barbara," he said at length, "I think we understand each other now; you must not wish me to speak more plainly. I hope——" then in his scrupulous truth altering the word, "of course—I do not know how to put it; but, of course, if you meet any one whom you can like, who will help you, and help them all, it will be happier—it will be wiser."

Then she snatched her hand out of his grasp, with a look on her face that he never forgot.

"You can spare me the rest," she said, and there was a touch of scorn in her voice. "I think we had better go home now, Norman;" then he turned silently with her, and walked by her side till they came to the green door in the wall.

She was for turning in, hardly knowing what she was about, but he stopped her.

"Not like that, Barbara; surely you will say good-bye. Are you really angry with me, my dear?"

A sad quiver of her lips answered him; but as though to make amends, she held out her hand to him.

"One makes friends only to lose them," faltered

Bab; "I never thought to lose you like this. Good-bye; thank you for all you have done for me," she finished, stammering painfully, and unable to look him in the face; she could not bear to pain him, but how was she to say she was not angry?

"Good-bye," he repeated, almost inaudibly; she looked such a little young creature as she stood there before him, that he was almost moved to take her in his arms as a child and press her to his heart; the impulse was strong upon him: if he had done so—if she had once felt his kiss—had once recognised the warmth and reality of his love, she would never have doubted him again—never have swerved from her loyal allegiance to him; but he repressed the wish, and only stood holding her cold hands in that strong grasp of his, as though he could not relinquish them.

Oh, Norman, let me go," and her voice was fretful with misery.

"Yes, I will let you go, Barbara—little Barbara; good-bye." She had a dim idea that he bade God bless her as she almost fled from him, hiding herself in the shrubberies till he had passed down the lane, and then stealing out again in the dark, like a hunted thing.

Her only thought was to be alone—alone in her trouble. Fearlessly she tracked one dark road after another, till she reached the little gate by the

bracken, and there she turned in, rustling lightly over the dry heather, till she reached the hollow where she had sat with Nest, and there she threw herself down, and she and the firs had it out together.

And more noble confidants she could not have chosen; their fragrant breath and hushed stillness soothed as nothing else could have soothed her, and drew out the pent-up pain.

Oh, Barbara—my pet, my darling—the blessing and the curse of your womanhood is upon you, the terror and anguish of an uncrowned love. My heart is sore for you, as it is sore for all God's maidens to whom fate has given pitiful blanks—most sore for the sweetness and freshness of your youth, which is to fade as other women's have faded before you.

My Barbara, winsome and brave and frolicsome no longer! my Barbara, not seeing or recognising her cross, but taking up the burden of her days with a sad patience, putting bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter, staining her truth with the zeal of a martyr, but without a martyr's joy! my Barbara, lying at the roots of the dark pine-trees, with her young head buried in their dust of years, sobbing the tearless sobs of pain—wild—ungovernable, and clenching her little hands in rebellious misery; alas, alas! Barbara, Barbara!

Such outbursts exhaust themselves; by-and-by

comes the paralysis of pain, and then fierce arguments, anger, immeasurable scorn, presently infinite yearnings, passionate, pitiful! Barbara passes through all these sad changes before she rises weak as a beaten child, feeling bruised and broken in every limb, and drags herself wearily from the spot. But she has suffered so that she will never look on the firs again without a shudder of remembrance. Blindfold she has walked over the nine burning ploughshares of iron; no wonder if that scorching leaves scars to her dying day. Some of her thoughts will stamp themselves on her life for ever; and bitterest of all was the thought that they had parted, and that she had not forgiven him—that her anger and her love were so mingled together that she could not separate them. She felt in some dim, inscrutable way that he was wronging her, that he was hiding something from her still, something of which she would not approve; it might be that that promise of his compelled his absence, but could a man be so bound that he might not take any woman to him to wife? This was what she could not understand. This coldness, the icy barrier of his reserve, was dreadful to her in her young vitality; she cried out against such love as his, it was not worthy of the name; he had told her almost plainly that he had chosen her for his wife, that at some time in his life he had striven and hoped to attain her; was she

a child to be so wooed and won from her capricious dislike of him only to be put aside when the winning was certain? was he not bound to her, if not outwardly, at least by an unconscious understanding, by the very fact that he had so triumphed? was this less sacred to him than his promise? She had owned him for her lord and master, and had secretly done him homage in her heart, making sweetest promises of obedience and faith, and now she was driven to aver that he was the very hardest lord and master that a woman could have chosen.

But he had never loved her; he had honored her with his friendship, and in a cold distant way was educating her to be his wife, till the loss of his money, and that inexplicable promise of his, made marriage impossible to him. If he had so loved her, could he have said that word to her—that it would be wiser for her to take some other man? Poor Bab! we can imagine her wearying herself amid all these blind gropings and vain conjectures; little did she guess the mistaken nobility that was the saddest secret of all.

No, it was all over—all over with the past, present, and future of Barbara Heathcote's life; so she told herself as she dragged herself heavily towards home; she had sickened of the safe monotony of her life, and had cried out for excitement and the good and evil knowledge of experience, and how

awfully had her prayer been answered; she was walking on gladly in her own strength, and the ground had opened before her feet; one by one she could see her hopes crumbling beneath her, the strong arm on which she had hoped to lean was withdrawn with a suddenness that made her totter. Oh, what if in her blindness and her misery, made reckless by despair, she throws herself into the chasm, leaving her guardian angel standing mournfully on the brink?

Oh, hush! do not blame her! if she is faulty, if she disappoints you, are we any of us perfect? Some sins are only the errors of love. Remember, the greatest of all virtues is charity.

CHAPTER VII.

"I AM GOING TO MARRY MY FRIEND."

" And in that time and place she answer'd me,
And in the compass of three little words,
More musical than ever came in one,
The silver fragments of a broken voice
Made me most happy, faltering, 'I am thine.'"

Tennyson.

BARBARA saw no one that night, and the next day remained closely shut up in her den, ostensibly painting, but the colors dried on the palette before she had touched a brush. In the evening Dr. Heathcote wanted her to read to him, but she excused herself on the plea of a sick headache; and finding that there was no other way to escape Hester's kind scrutiny, she was obliged to submit to her remedy and go early to bed.

But the next day the headache was so much worse, and there were such visible signs of depression and languor about her, that Hester persuaded her not to rise, and in her mental and bodily prostration, worn out by sleeplessness and

pain, it was a relief to be allowed to lie quiet and be taken care of; all the more that Hester was a very thoughtful nurse, and abstained from all comment and questioning. If any doubt arose in her own mind as to the cause of Bab's sudden indisposition, she did not put it into words; perhaps she remembered the time when she too had turned her face to the wall, and felt that her life was bitter to her. It was certainly a new thing to see Bab lying there with her white face and heavy eyelids, but perhaps after all it was only the loss of her home that was troubling her; it would be wiser not to put any fresh thoughts into her head, and treat her only for a bad headache; and then she changed the fragrant cloths on Barbara's forehead, putting back the girl's heavy hair tenderly, and moving softly across the darkened room.

Bab lay quiet, and submitted gratefully; she seemed to have no powers of resistance; the very wish to move was gone from her. Not that such a state was long possible to a person of Bab's temperament. About noon the next day she grew suddenly restless, and that evening, throwing off every trace of illness, began dressing herself, and, though weak and with trembling fingers, refusing all Hester's offers of assistance, putting her aside in her abrupt fashion; she felt quite well now, she

remarked, her headache was gone, she was less feverish, and she only wanted air.

"A pretty sort of convalescence, Barbara," said Hester, half disposed to be angry; "I never saw you look so ill in my life," an opinion in which Bab was forced to agree when she looked in the glass; the big eyes were bigger and brighter than ever, with those purple lines round them, and her face was quite wan. "I look about as limp and flabby as an old hat," remarked Bab, with grim humor; "I wish Miss Vokes would lend me her green silk;" and then she went downstairs, her knees knocking together with weakness, but still refusing Hester's arm; she went down the lawn in the same tottery fashion, and was glad when she reached the low stone step of the summer-house. The air revived her, as she knew it would, and then her restlessness returned; no one came near her; Ruth and Connie were out, she knew, and Hester had said something about going down the village; still Leigh and her father were in the house; Dr. Heathcote was resting after his day's work, and Leigh was with him. It was very odd that neither came to look after her.

Suddenly it occurred to her that to-day was the time appointed for her answer to Nigel; she had quite forgotten it,—perhaps he had been already. Hester had said something about a visitor that had

detained her in the afternoon, but Barbara had thought she meant Mr. Herbert; perhaps St. Ronans had called as well, and had heard she was ill. She began to breathe freely, and then all at once she remembered he was rather given to repeat his visits; it was still early in the evening, he might walk up after dinner. He had said that he would see her that day week, and he was given to keep with some tenacity to his purpose; the idea gave her cold chills; she determined that, say what he would, he should not draw her from her father's side to-night, and with this resolution she hastened to the house with as much speed as her weakness would allow.

Leigh was standing half in and half out of the drawing-room window, and looking very disconsolate; he held up his hand warningly, with a gesture of silence, and hurried to meet her.

"Strath is in there talking to my father,—don't interrupt them," he said, taking her arm in his old fashion and turning her round to the shrubberies; "bless me what a dingy dollie the child looks, to be sure; and how your hand shakes, Barbara!"

"Nigel Strath is in there with Daddie?" repeated Barbara, with a sudden sinking at heart: it was not the first time she had felt he was too much for her.

"Yes; I can't think what they're talking about: it seems a very earnest sort of conversation, and Nigel

looks as grave as a judge; they won't let me into the secret. There I have been airing myself, and feeling as glum as possible: I can't stand seeing the governor fret himself as he is doing. Mark my word, Barbara; I don't want to frighten you, but if this goes on he will have another stroke."

"What do you mean? Has there anything fresh happened?" and Barbara felt as though she had neglected her father selfishly in her trouble.

"Don't you know? Oh, I forgot you have been mewed up in your den these two days, with Hester mounting dragon over you. How do you like sisterly attendance, eh? Here's Ruth been trying hard to get at you; but she declares Hester is jealous, and insists on monopolizing you. Well, I can't say you speak well for her nursing; you look a regular little misery."

"Oh, do be quiet, Gyp," returned Barbara, impatiently; "and go on with what you were saying."

"What was I saying; let me see. Well, did you not know we have had two people after the house?"

"No; Hester never told me. I suppose she did not want to trouble me. Why, who can they be?"

"Geoffrey Hunsden was one; he is a good fellow—'pon honor he is," said Leigh, with a droll imitation of Geoffrey's manner of repeating his favorite expression; "but the governor saw through his little

game directly; he would have it that it was a peace offering for treating Hester so badly, and wouldn't even treat with the agent. You know the grand way Dad has when he is up on the high horse: he glared through his spectacles at the unfortunate man, till his red hair rose quite on end; if you had heard the tone in which he bade him take back his answer to Sir Geoffrey Hunsden! He as much as told him that Geoff shouldn't have an inch belonging to him."

"Oh! I am so sorry: Geoffrey meant to be kind," murmured Barbara; "what a good brother he would have been to us, Leigh."

"Yes, no end jolly. I was awfully sorry that that affair came to an end. What a heap of disappointments we are to the governor. I shouldn't wonder, Barbara, should you, if Strath were coming just the same dodge? he's rich, and generous for anything."

"Oh, I hope not," said Bab, with a return of her faintness. She was trying to drive off the subject, but Leigh would recur to it. "Do you mind sitting down, dear?" then as he complied, "you have not told me who the second person was."

"Oh, true; well, it was Mrs. Deanes;" and as Barbara held up her hands in horror, "I am afraid she wants it very badly, Dame Muffet; her family is large and growing up, and no one will take pity

on her girls; and serve them right, too—a lot of over-dressed simpletons. She says their present house is so small, that they are overcrowded, and that as there's not another to be found in the neighborhood, they must build, unless we follow the direct leadings of Providence and turn out to please them."

"Leigh, don't joke about anything so dreadful."

"That's how she put it; she did indeed, 'pon honor, Barbara," with another sly drawl.

"But when did she come; and how did she know the house was to be sold?"

"She was here this afternoon. Such a piece of work! Of course Durnford is ringing with the news of the doctor's losses. I am afraid Mrs. Deanes's tongue won't smoothe things for him there: she gave him such a lecture on the selfishness of putting his family to such risks; I believe she thought he had been gambling. Poor old Dad! he very nearly cried when she had gone. It was too bad to set on him now he is down; he will never hold up his head again."

"Why did not Hester tell me?" said Barbara, excitedly, as she got up and began pacing the shrubbery path restlessly. "That odious woman! but she shall not have the house to triumph over us. Think of Katie, and Amelia, and all those unmannerly girls taking possession of our dear old rooms! Leigh, I tell you she shall not have it."

"I am afraid she must, Babchen," replied Leigh, mournfully, now showing his real feeling. "She has talked Dad into giving her the refusal of the house, and so putting himself completely into her power. Never mind," he added kindly, as he saw Bab's uncontrollable vexation; "the house must have a purchaser, and I don't think it need matter to us who has it, if we are not to live in it ourselves; that is a very small matter: what is more important to us is the bad effect it is having on Daddie."

"Do you mean he is fretting over it?" she asked, with a great longing to go and comfort him. Why had she given in to her selfish grief, and kept away from him these two days? "If he be ill, Norman must see him," she finished, forcing herself painfully to say that name.

"Oh, of course Norman has seen him: but that does not make us much easier; he only says, word for word, what I told you just now—that he must be kept from worry, and that there was sufficient agitation about him to induce another stroke; he says there is a pressure on his mind—as if we did not know that already—and that, unless it were removed, he would not answer for the consequences; he has ordered him off work for a day or two, and recommended the strictest quiet. It is no good fretting over it, Babchen," he added, as he saw her

utter misery: "of course he is the dearest and the best father living," here Leigh almost broke down, "but I don't see how we can help him here; and that's the mischief of it."

"Don't you? perhaps I do," returned Barbara, with set lips, as she resumed her restless walk. Weakness was forgotten in her agitation; she was spared further questioning, by Leigh being called off; a moment after he returned, looking greatly amazed.

"Father wants you, Barbara. Strath is still there, and talking like one o'clock; the best of it is, they've ordered me away again. So I'm off to the Mill, to fetch Ruth."

A terror, such as her brave spirit had never known before in her life, came over Barbara, and she almost clung to her brother.

"Oh, don't leave me; do go in with me, Gyp," she implored.

He looked at her in inconceivable astonishment.

"Are you crazy, Bab? Why, there is only your precious St. Ronans in there: he won't eat you, I suppose."

"How do I know that? Don't think me silly, but I do wish you would come."

"But I can't, child; do, pray, be sensible. How am I to go in, when Dad particularly desired to speak to you alone? It is hard lines, being kept out

of some pretty little secret, but there is no help for it; come, run along. I never knew you were such a goose as to be nervous before." Did he know what she feared? Perhaps he did. There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes, and a pleased, excited look in his face. "Come, Bab," with a boyish push, "pluck up your courage, and be off with you;" and then she turned her back on him, and walked slowly to the house. Her fate was too hard for her; her temptation had come in her hour of weakness. She knew as certainly what they would say to her, and how she would answer them, as she knew that her trustful faith was gone from her, and that her heart was breaking; and yet she never hesitated, but walked straight into her father's presence.

Nigel rose, much shocked when he saw her; but she never looked at him; she quietly crossed the room, and knelt down by Dr. Heathcote's armchair, first putting up her face to be kissed, like the child she was.

"You sent for me, dear father," she said, gently. "I have not seen you since yesterday, have I?—except for a minute; and Leigh says you are not very well; you want your nurse back, Daddie."

"I always want her," said the doctor, fondly. "This girl of mine can be ill spared, Nigel."

"Barbara, my love, have you spoken to your old friend, St. Ronans?"

"How do you do, St. Ronans?" said Barbara, without looking at him, however; but he was not to be put off; he came round and shook hands with her, and said how grieved he was to hear of her indisposition. He had come over to speak to her, but finding her so unwell, had talked to Dr. Heathcote instead; he hoped she would forgive him. Barbara's face looked downcast and sad, as he spoke; she fingered little tunes on her father's arm, without answering; seeing which, he and the doctor exchanged glances, and Nigel withdrew into the background. Barbara did not see the glances: she was having a frightened argument with herself; how ill her father looked, how fearfully worn; there was a strained, bloodshot look in his eyes too, and an added feebleness in his voice which had not escaped her. Nigel's tone, too, alarmed her; it was gentle, but it was dictatorial, almost triumphant: the vague apology was only assumed; of course she knew what he had said, and that he had meant to say it; her opinion of his generosity was changing now; the lines of her mouth set and hardened as she fingered those tunes.

"My dear," said Dr. Heathcote, taking down her restless hand, "it seems to me, my Bab is growing a woman; can you guess what Nigel Strath

has been telling me, just now?" and he eyed her proudly through his spectacles, till they became dewy, and he had to take them off to wipe them.

"Telling you? oh, yes," she returned, with a steady composure that surprised them both; "of course I can't pretend not to understand. I know very well what you mean, Daddie."

"She is right, doctor," returned Nigel in a forced voice. Barbara's calmness staggered him.

"You know that Nigel wants my little daughter. Did you know that, Barbara?"

"I knew it, father."

"You knew it, and never confided in your old Daddie—fie, Bab!"

"You had too much to trouble you; you could not have borne it. I longed to tell you," she answered, laying her head on his knees. The doctor smoothed her hair with a trembling hand: the ripples were quite crazy to-night.

"You had some reason beyond this for not telling me, Barbara," he said at length.

"Had I? oh dear! oh dear! it seems so long ago, that I almost forget. I dare say I had; well, you know it now, father. This day week—it seems like a month ago—but it was only this day week, St. Ronans asked me to be his wife: he had asked me once before." The quiet manner in which she

stated the fact made St. Ronans start as though he had been stung; her tone was simply indifferent.

"And you gave him no direct answer. Is this what has been making you ill, Barbara?"

"No, it has not made me ill," she returned, with perfect truth.

"Well, I am glad of that; these girls never know their own mind, Nigel. Barbara, my child, you and I must talk over this matter a little; you have no idea how generous he is, how worthy of my Barbara's love;" then Barbara knew that his heart was set on her marrying him.

"Father, I know everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes, I know what he will do for us—about the house and Leigh; but that is not the point. Father, how much did my mother love you when she married you?" then a flush came into the doctor's worn face.

"Why do you ask me that, Barbara?"

"Never mind why, Daddie, but I do ask it. I dearly love my mother, I often think of her; she used to give me sweeter kisses than any one has ever given me since; she was the dearest, the dearest——" the girl was fast becoming hysterical, but restrained herself. "I wish she were here now, father, to help me in this."

"My poor Hester! I wish she were."

"I don't think she will mind you telling what I want to hear. She was a very young girl, and a governess, I know, when you married her; she must have been very fond of you."

"I was not her first love, Barbara," said her father, in some emotion.

"Oh! were you not? that was bad—bad for her, I mean; but she loved us all so tenderly. I suppose, then, she married you because you were her friend."

"Yes," replied the doctor, drawn on by her simplicity to answer her, "because I was her friend, and she was so lonely and unhappy. I was not the man to attract a young creature like that, and so admired as she was; but I don't think she ever regretted marrying me."

"Of course not. I remember how she used to look at you: she told Essie one day that you were the best man living. But what became of the other one, Paddie? did she ever see him again?"

"My child, what makes you so curious? You must forgive our Barbara, Nigel; she has odd ways sometimes. What has brought your mother into your head, Bab? I never heard you talk like this before."

"Father, I do so want to know about her; never mind anything else just now. But did she ever see him again?"

"Yes, child, yes; he was not worthy of her love: she found that out afterwards."

"Before she married you?"

"Yes, of course. She was sore, poor thing, and lonely, without a friend in the world; so I just took her home and cared for her. Oh, I don't think there was another woman like your mother, Barbara."

"And she married you, because you were her friend, and you helped her."

"Let us change the subject, little one; you have forgotten Nigel."

"No, I have not forgotten him," repeated Barbara, in a strange dreamy voice; she had her head still on her father's knee, and was reaching up and stroking at his beard with restless fingers, as she talked. Nigel sat watching the little hands greedily; if this were his third wooing, it was a very silent one.

"Bab, my dear," remonstrated the Doctor mildly.

"Daddie, leave me alone. I am thinking of my mother; she was young, I know, younger than I, and broken-hearted; she had a lover, and he disappointed her, and she married her friend. It sounds sad, doesn't it? but somehow it ended happily. She would not like to see you look as you look now, Daddie, so grey, and worn, and ill; and oh, how sorry she would be for Leigh!" her head weighed heavily on his knee for a moment, and

something like a sob rose to her lips; and then she struggled wearily to her feet.

"One kiss, one kiss, Daddie," she said, stooping over him; "you must give me one kiss for my mother's sake;" and she put her arms round his neck, almost pressing the grey head to her bosom, and then she crossed the room and stood before St. Ronans.

"I am yours, Nigel," she faltered, holding out her hand to him; then, as he started up, searching her face with keen, incredulous eyes, "it is not the right sort of love, I know, but I will try to be good to you; indeed, I will try very hard to be good."

"Barbara, do you mean it? Do you know what you are doing?"

"Yes," she answered calmly; "I am going to marry my friend."

"You really mean what you say? you will not repent it—you will not go back from your word?" he continued in a tremulous voice.

"I never go back from my word, St. Ronans," she returned proudly. "Bab is yours, if you want her."

"If I want her! Oh, my darling, my darling!" He sat down for a moment, still holding her before him, and drew her hands before his eyes. She stood by him quite passively, only casting rather piteous looks at her father; but when Nigel uncovered

his face, she was surprised to see that blueness of the lips again.

"I am not strong just yet," he said, speaking lightly, to disguise his pain, "and you have tried me so; but it is all over now, dear, is it not?" and then he took her to her father.

"She consents, Nigel."

"Yes, she consents. I have her at last; but she was hard enough to win; I must hold my treasure tightly."

"Are you happy, Daddie?"

"Very, very happy. God bless my Barbara!"

"Do you bless me really? Is that your hand upon my head? Are you sure it will be a true blessing, Daddie? Do you think I have done right?"

"Quite right, my dearest, and as your father would have wished you. Give me your hand, Nigel; you have won my girl gallantly. She is not handsome, and I do not know that she is specially good, except to her Daddie; but I should think a king worthy of my Barbara."

"I will take care of her, sir," he answered, and such tenderness shone in his grey eyes; to any other girl, he would have seemed the beau ideal of a lover: but Barbara never looked once away from her father.

"I am so glad I have made you happy, Daddie," she whispered; "that, at any rate, is worth living for.

You will never have to leave the dear old house now: Nigel has promised to see to that, and to Leigh too."

"That is all understood, Barbara," returned St. Ronans quickly.

"Yes, I know, but I want to make him happy. You are better now, dear, are you not? Leigh will never be a trouble to you again."

"There is a great weight lifted off me," mused the doctor. "Who would have thought of anything so fortunate, as that my little Barbara should be the mistress of St. Ronans? I declare I must tell Norman myself." Then she shivered slightly, and buried her face in his breast.

"We are tiring Dr. Heathcote, I am afraid;" and St. Ronans touched her hand gently, as it hung down by her side.

"Aye, go with Nigel," said the doctor, smiling; "he is impatient to have you to himself, I see. Run away, my precious, or he will be getting jealous of your old father;" then she rose wearily at his bidding, and followed Nigel out on the dusky lawn.

"I shall bring my mother, to-morrow, Barbara," he said, as they slowly paced the terrace.

"Your mother! Oh yes, I understand: of course I must see Lady Strath."

"And you will try to love her?"

"I don't know that it will be any use trying," she answered sadly, "but I will do my best."

"For my sake?" he pleaded.

"Yes, for your sake, if you will. I don't think she likes me, but I will do what I can, for all that."

"And I may give your love to her?"

"Yes, you may do that, if you will, and to Nest, too; but, Nigel, don't let her come here—not yet, I mean?"

"Who? Nest?"

"Yes. I don't want to see her: let her write to me, if she likes. Tell her that I said so. When I am happier—stronger, I mean—I will come to her myself." Then he promised her gently that he would fulfil her behest.

"Geoffrey makes her very happy," he said, after another pause.

"I am glad of that—dear Nest!" she checked an involuntary sigh. "Well, she is good; she deserves all he can give her, does she not, St. Ronans?"

"The old name, Barbara!" he returned reproachfully.

"I beg your pardon, I ought to have said Nigel. Indeed I will do all you wish," she added, with a sad submission that went to his heart. He would rather have had her answer petulantly than that. "I suppose it comes more naturally to me: you must forgive me, Nigel."

"Must I? How humbly you ask. Can this be Barbara who is speaking?"

"I don't know; I suppose so. I think the old Barbara Heathcote is dead: I feel as though I have lost my own identity, and must pinch myself to be sure I am Bab!"

"How scared and wild you look!" then, in a quick vehement tone that startled her, "Barbara, have you any idea how I love you?"

"Yes, I think so," she answered in the same weary way, "but I wonder——"

"You wonder at what, my dearest?"

"That you can be so content with your bargain, —that you can give me so much, I mean, and be satisfied with so little in return."

"I never said I was satisfied," he returned gravely. Then she cast a frightened glance at him.

"Nigel, you have my word."

"Your word! yes, of course, I know I have won you, you startled thing; but what a winning! but for my love, it were something pitiful. Don't I feel you panting and struggling under my hand, like a snared bird: you are not tamed yet, my Beautiful!"

Oh, how was she broken, that she had no answer to that! The small head reared itself proudly a minute, and then drooped heavily, heavily: he had a right; aye, surely he had a right now.

"And you thought I was satisfied; well, so I am

for the present. But I shall never rest, never be content, till you love me, as I know you can love, Barbara! Look how passively your hand lies in mine!"

"Too true," she murmured.

"I am not blaming you; I know you have given me all you can,—that it is not your fault that your heart is cold to me."

"God knows it is not!" came through her white lips.

"How wearily you speak! I can hardly think it is Barbara; and so wan and weak too. Dear, I would not reproach you for worlds,—to-night of all nights too. Do I not know what you are marrying me for? have you ever deceived me? You are sacrificing yourself for your father's sake? I, for one, cannot find fault with your nobility."

"You are very generous," she faltered.

"What?—generous to myself; you are a part of myself I verily believe; you have not done wrong to trust yourself to me: as far as I can make it, your life shall be sunshine."

"I hope I shall be good to you," she answered, trying to speak gratefully.

"Good to me! of course you will; not but what Bab has plenty of faults, but they will be beauties in my eyes."

"I wish you would not talk so, St. Ronan's."

"Nigel, Barbara—Nigel;" then she repeated his name with a dreary meekness that gave him pain.

"Barbara, what ails you?" he asked at last anxiously.

"I am tired, and my head aches; should you mind it very much, if I went in?" for she felt as though she could endure it no longer; then he reluctantly permitted her to leave him. The love-making had been on his side hitherto; but, considering all things, she had not borne herself so much amiss. True, she had moved, and looked, and spoken with a sort of dazed monotony, as though she were passing through some dream; but there had been a submissive gentleness with it all, that touched him greatly.

She had said to him that Barbara Heathcote was dead; and as she went through her tedious undressing, with aching limbs and that numb pain in her head, she told herself that to all intents and purposes she had spoken the truth; that the old Barbara, her other self, would never have felt this weakness, this utter blank, this absence of all thought and individuality: her face was moist, and she put up her hand and found it was wet with her tears; why was she crying, she wondered? She was too tired even to feel unhappy,—oh! far too tired; and then she began sobbing weakly, as she lay down in her bed.

But, waking shortly after midnight, she thought she heard Norman's voice close beside her, saying the same old words, "Be faithful, Barbara!" and sat up trembling and shivering, till she remembered it was only a dream; there was a streak of starlight when she woke, then a broad space of darkness; by-and-by grey dawn, and the twitter of waking birds. Hitherto she had sat quite motionless; but as the first sunbeam touched her window-sill, she pulled at the curtain impatiently, to shut out the day, and lay down with her face hidden in the pillows, as she had lain among the firs that night, crying out that she could not, she could not,—that her truth had gone from her, and that she was Nigel's now, —that she must be faithful to no one but Nigel!

CHAPTER IX.

FOOTSTEPS IN THE SHRUBBERY.

"Robbed, robbed of life's illusions sweet;
Love dead outside her closed door,
And passion fainting at her feet,
To wake no more.

* * * *

No more but this, the partial care,
The natural kindness for its own,
The trust that waxeth unaware
As worth is known.

* * * *

And yet, O good, O wise and true,
I would for all my fealty
That I could be as much to you
As you to me.

Jean Ingelow.

SUCH a night was not the best preparation for a trying day. Barbara realised this with some dismay, when she found the rising from her bed difficult on account of her weakness; during the mechanical portions of her dressing, she rehearsed drearily the part she must play during the next few hours; there were the congratulations of her sisters and Leigh to be gone through; her heart sank as she thought

of it; how was she to comport herself, and manifest no open repugnance, when they overwhelmed her with their expressions of joy? She must show herself grateful for their good wishes, and as happy in her changed circumstances as would be compatible with truth. They must know nothing about the inward sinking, and the sleeplessness, and the tears: if they remarked her altered looks, she must shield herself under the plea of illness; they must never guess that she had so suffered, that the brave spirit was utterly broken. The part was a difficult one, she knew, but she must go through with it; there must be no halting, no half-measures, no drawing back, if she was to make her sacrifice complete. The thing was done: she had given her word, "for better for worse;" she knew that now, as surely as though she had said them before the altar. "Whatever comes is all in the day's work, after all," said Bab, as she sat with half-extinguished eyes on the edge of her chair. "It is no good thinking what I am to say or do, to this or that person; better take every moment as it comes, and do the best with it that I can."

Poor philosophy! leaning on her own strength, as usual; but the reed was of sufficient stability not to give way beneath her weight for some time yet.

But that interview with Lady Strath would be the hardest: not even for Nigel's sake, could she even bring herself to like her. There was something,

under all her smoothness and soft-spoken words, which roused an antagonistic spirit in Barbara, and which her fearless honesty could not brook; it was difficult to express what this really was, but in her own mind Bab convicted her of covert insincerity and all manner of pleasant guile; and if you had asked her frankly for her opinion, she would have confessed that, in spite of her plausible ways, she would have sooner been caressed by a serpent than by Lady Strath. Of course this was not charitable, and indeed a positive injury to Lady Strath; but, you see, Barbara had strong likes and dislikes of her own, and was much given to express both rather loudly, till she grew somewhat dumb with her grief.

And then there was that telling of Norman, and Norman's mother. He would see that she had taken him at his word: would he despise her for it? would he think that Nigel's wealth had tempted her? He had always treated her thoughts as visionary, and never believed her capable of real sacrifice. Ah! herein, she felt, lay the true martyrdom: she had lowered herself, perhaps, in the eyes of the man she loved; she was acting so, that he could not but misapprehend her. True, he had so left her, that any one might woo her without blame; but then to be won so easily, a mere lapse of days, a quick asking, an impulsive answer!—how could she hope

that he possessed the clue to her real meaning? how could he know that despair, and generosity, and the yearnings of filial love had impelled her to this course. He was a man one-sided and much given to harsh judgment, rather prone to impute low motives to others, and yet trying himself by an almost unattainable standard of excellence: in all probability; and according to his lights he would judge her dispassionately, and in the end misunderstand her altogether. "I think if he only knew why I am doing it," she sighed, "and the necessity, the dreadful necessity, for it all, I could go through with it, and not feel it so utterly unbearable; but, there, he will never know!" She was sick with the desire for his approbation: if he could only have laid his hand upon her head, and said, "You have done well Bab,—we are both suffering, but I think it is for the right," she would have felt comparatively happy; at least, the sting of misery would have been drawn; she would have lost that sense of hardness that so oppressed her; she would have found that theirs was a community of sorrow—that he was as faithful and loving at the core as she; she would have replaced him on his pedestal, and made much ado with sweet womanly worship. Ah but, so knowing, would she ever have left him? would any amount of self-sacrifice and abnegation on his part have torn her from his side—true helpmeet to his true man-

hood, whom only death must divorce? No; cruel as it was, it was easier for her to act as she did, believing him coldly indifferent, changed to her by alien circumstances, and judging her with a harsh judgment all the more that he had once loved her.

Hester's entrance roused her from these tormenting thoughts, and she made haste to brush her hair over her eyes, to gain a moment's obscurity; but under her long veil she saw Hester's face was radiant.

"Good-morning, Essie."

"Yes, good-morning indeed! What do you mean, you provoking child, running away to bed and shutting yourself up without bidding any of us good-night? Nigel said that your head ached: he was obliged to apologise, you see; but I know it was a shy fit."

"My head did ache, Essie."

"Did it, dear? I am so sorry; and last evening of all evenings, too. All this excitement is too much for you: you must take care, or we shall be having you ill in earnest."

No answer; the brushes worked steadily.

"Well, Barbara!"

"Well, Essie!"

"How long am I to wait till that funny little face comes to view? Oh dear! oh dear! and such a pale one too;" and her tone changed to one of motherly

commiseration. "How ill you look, Barbara. Whatever is the matter!"

"I have not slept well," stammered Barbara.

"You need not tell me that, child," replied Hester, kissing her. They say being in love is wearing work, and I dare say it is to any one so excitable as you; but now everything has come right, you must try and take it more quietly." Hester thought she had discovered the cause of Barbara's indisposition now; that she had been secretly in love with Nigel all along, never daring to expect that her hopes would be realised; and the little that Doctor Heathcote had told her on the subject had done much to confirm her in this opinion.

"I don't know about taking it quietly," returned Barbara, running her hand through her hair in her usual fashion, but speaking in a strangely subdued voice. "I scarcely know yet whether I am awake or dreaming."

"No, of course not," was the soothing answer. "Things have come so quickly that they have startled you; but, Barbara, you must let me congratulate you."

"Don't, Essie."

"Why not, you silly child?"

"Because—because I hate being congratulated," she returned, with a shade of her old manner, only for its sadness. "Don't you remember what I once said on that subject, Essie?"

"Yes, I know," replied Hester, slightly wincing at the recollection; "but that was different. You were very right to refuse me your congratulations then, because you knew," with a sudden honest blush, "that I did not really love Geoffrey,—that I was marrying him for reasons of my own."

Barbara still pushed her fingers through her hair wearily.

"Don't let us go back to that. I believe," she faltered, "I am afraid I was rather hard on you then."

"Not harder than I deserved," she replied; "but you are right, and we have pleasanter things to think of this morning. I am so glad of it for your sake, dear."

"And I am glad that you are pleased, Essie."

"Why, I should think so. Could anything have happened more fortunately? I think we ought all to sing a Te Deum on our knees" ("Heaven forbid!" thought Barbara.) "I don't believe any one could be more noble in his generosity than Nigel. Here he has been telling us that all father's debts shall be cleared, and the house assured to him, and that he will provide for Leigh's future; and he does it all so easily, too, that one quite loses the sense of obligation. He took his brother's right all round, last night, Barbara, and not one of us could have reproved him. Ruth is quite enthusiastic in his

praise; and oh, you should have heard Leigh. Indeed, indeed, I am very glad."

"Why do you sigh, Essie?"

"I think it is well to be you, Barbara, and be loved like that; not that I grudge it you, dear."

Barbara pressed her hand without speaking: speech was somewhat difficult just now; but she was beginning to think one of her dreaded troubles was over, when Connie burst in.

"Breakfast is ready; where is she, Hester? Oh, there she is;" and Connie pounced upon her breathlessly. "Many, many, happy returns of the day—of yesterday, I mean," gasped out Connie ecstatically. "O Bab, he's a regular darling."

"Don't, Con, you are strangling me;" and she sat helplessly grasping her brushes.

"But, Barbara, why don't you speak? Here's the Prince come at last for Cinderella; and Cinderella looking as glum as her own ashes. And such a beautiful Prince! I am half in love with him myself. I declare, if it were not for Sydney," and here Connie stopped bashfully, shaking her yellow curls and looking at her eldest sister.

"Nonsense, Connie; don't you see that Barbara has had a bad night, and looks as tired as possible. We not must quite overwhelm her with our attentions."

"No; but, Barbara, tell me are you not happy?" persisted Connie; and kneeling down before her,

and bringing her bright face on a level with hers; "and is he not handsome?"

"Yes, he is very handsome, Connie?"

"And good and rich and generous, and everything that a Prince should be?" went on Connie joyfully.

"Yes; he's all that, and much more."

"And you love him?"

"And I love him," repeated Barbara, thankful that she could say so much.

"Well, then, why don't you look happier? Don't you think it a very wonderful thing, that he should choose you, and not Hester? To tell you the truth," continued Connie frankly, "I can't understand that part at all; not but what you are a dear little thing enough, but then no one would think you equal to him."

"I am quite of your opinion," said Barbara, with a queer smile. Connie was accustomed to tell these unpleasant truths; she called it speaking her mind.

"Well what makes you so aggravating, then? Here he's been and put you on I can't tell you how high a pedestal, and is telling everybody you are perfection, and all that, and just as gravely too as though he thought we believed him, and we not daring to contradict him, and tell him what a tiresome, changeable little lady you really are; and instead of being as proud as a peacock, there you sit with your 'Yes' and your 'Noes, Connie,' and your

shut-up eyes, and not looking a bit pretty either—only Bab."

"Have you finished, Con?"

"Yes, I have finished," grumbled Connie, with another hug. "I have been putting you through your Catechism, and very badly you've repeated it. I'll go down and tell Leigh I'm disgusted with you."

"Yes, go," agreed Hester, coming quickly to Barbara's rescue. "She'll never get dressed while you are chattering there;" and then she stood quietly by while Barbara completed her unfinished toilet, putting in skilful touches here and there, but without much effect; do what she would, the grey dress and the blue ribbons were decided failures to-day.

"Now for it," thought Bab, as she crept slowly down the stairs. Ben, lying on the mat, did not know his mistress's weary footfall, and wagged his tail very feebly as she passed. She opened the door quite nervously, in anticipation of Leigh's greeting, and not without cause at the hugging she got: another time she might have enjoyed that and his warm kisses, but now!

"That will do, Gyp."

"That will do, indeed! Whatever have you kept me waiting for like this? Do you know the first congratulation belongs to me. What a brick you are, Babchen!"

"He is, you mean," she said, trying hard to speak lightly and in her old manner, but almost breaking down, as she passed into Ruth's open arms, her low-uttered, "I am so happy, dearest," very nearly oversetting her. "Dear, dear, how kind everybody is! But Daddie is the best;" and she put down her hand on his shoulder for a moment, as she took the chair by his side.

"He is, indeed," continued Leigh, teasingly. "So you've brought the name on the tapis, have you? 'Oh, don't leave me; do go in with me, Gyp,' that was the game last night, was it not?" And then as the blood rose in a torrent to her face, "The sly little Babchen, she knew what was coming when she made up that pitiful face. Who would have thought that Dame Muffet was to make the grandest match in the family?"

"Only Bab," chimed in Connie.

"Only Bab! I vow it must be Barbara now. Why how the child blinks at the light, like a regular owl. Who would have thought that a fellow like Strath should be taken with that furze-bush of a head, and those great eyes; have you bewitched him, you elf?"

"Oh, please do leave me alone," she implored.

"Leave you alone—not a bit of it. Don't you know that you are to be fêted and caressed by a grateful family? You're a public benefactor, Bab, that's what you are. Leave you alone, indeed!"

"But if I ask you as a favor, Gyp?"

"Nonsense; and now she's pretending to look grave."

"That's because the Prince is not here," put in Connie, mischievously. "He'll come presently with the pumpkin, and the mice, and the rest of it, and Cinderella will wake up then."

"It is as good as a fairy tale," protested Leigh. "Fancy Bab being a subject for a fairy tale; and when we had all made up our minds, too, that she was to marry Norman."

"Norman's too ugly," exclaimed Connie. Barbara turned with a face of agony to her father.

"Oh, Daddie, my head does ache so; cannot you find anything to cure it?" She might have said her heart too with equal truth: poor child! Leigh's talk was unendurable.

"Be quiet, children! A truce with your nonsense. Barbara, when you have finished your breakfast, you had better take a turn in the garden, my dear; that will do your head more good than anything. It is only over-excitement and want of sleep." And when she had gratefully made her escape, "You must not say much to her just now, Leigh, her spirits are too fluctuating: leave her to herself and Nigel Strath. She was very near an hysterical fit just now, with your teasing."

"Poor little Bab," muttered Leigh remorsefully.

"We must be very careful of our girl," continued the doctor, proudly; "she has not been very strong just now—I think all our troubles have tried her; and for the present she is too overstrained even to feel the sensible relief that we do. To think what my Barbara has done for us all!" he finished with some emotion, as he rose to look after her.

He found her wandering aimlessly in the shrubberies, but she brightened up at his approach; he walked up and down with her a long time, speaking now and then on indifferent subjects, admiring a flower here and a shrub there, till her agitation had subsided, and she could listen and take interest, and answer him gratefully: it was the first restful moment that had been hers for a long time, leaning on his arm, with his cheerful kindly voice in her ears; it did her heart good to see that the flushed unnatural look had passed from his face: true, it was more deeply lined and worn than she had ever seen it, and there was still the feebleness of convalescence about him; but his voice was genial as ever, and he laughed out once or twice over a joke of his own devising, his eyes twinkling in their old way; it was no small relief to her to see him like this, after what Leigh had told her. She had saved his life, it might be, at the sacrifice of her happiness; and as she walked to and fro with him in the fresh sunshine, she told herself that, in spite of everything, she had done well

—that she did not repent it. An interruption came all too soon. Dr. Heathcote was wanted in the surgery: the new assistant was on view. He was just saying a word to Barbara about Nigel, and the generous way in which he had acted towards them, when Connie summoned him. Barbara accompanied him back to the house, still hanging on his arm.

"I think I will go in, too," she said, "for Lady Strath is sure to be here soon;" and she had hardly spoken before they heard wheels coming up the carriage-drive. On such an occasion, Lady Strath would never have consented to dispense with ceremony. Connie danced delightedly up the gravel walk, much as Barbara would have done a month ago; now the little feet dragged wearily along.

"There's the pumpkin, and the mice, and the fairy godmother, and the beautiful young Prince and all; come along, Cindy dear, and don't keep him waiting."

"Hold your tongue, you little puss," returned Dr. Heathcote, good humoredly; "they're all jealous of you—that's what it is, Barbara. Connie knows that long-legged Sydney of hers is not fit to hold the stirrup for Bab's knight; go in to them, my dear, and as soon as Norman has finished with me I will come to you;" and with this promise she was obliged to let him go.

Lady Strath had received the news of her son's

success very quietly, and without fretting him with any unnecessary fuss; the thought that Barbara was to become her daughter-in-law was still as unpalatable as ever, but all the same she could not refrain from some inward self-gratulation at the thought that she had triumphed over Norman; she had looked upon him as her son's rival, and fought him, not without a species of courage, with his own weapons, knowing that no crookedness of dealing would avail her here; she had thrown herself into Nigel's hopes so entirely that it would have been wormwood and gall to have been defeated in her ends, but nevertheless she had shown a very moderate pleasure in her victory. "You must go and see her to-morrow, mother," Nigel had said to her with his sweetest smile, and more for that than for any wish to see his betrothed she had yielded; but now, as she saw her come into the room, she was fain to confess that the prize was a mean one, hardly worth the winning, and any triumph she might feel was swallowed up in a feeling of intense astonishment that Nigel should be so poor a fool for his pains.

Much of Barbara's good looks were dependent, as we said before, on her vivacity of expression, and also the wholesome coloring with which health and an open-air life had gifted her; sleeplessness and mental distress had robbed her of this bloom: her skin had

a dark unhealthy tint less becoming than absolute paleness, and her eyes were lustreless under their reddened lids; she was looking her worst then,—positively plain this morning; and last of all, that obstinate head of hers looked, as Lady Strath said, "as though her hair had been blown about in a strong wind for hours, and then set down before a hot fire to friz;" figuratively speaking, it was all in turbulent little waves; in reality, it looked anything but dignified—"a mop in convulsions," as Leigh once wickedly called it, but he was proud of the little brown wig, too.

No, Bab looked quainter than ever in her sadness, with that childish head of hers and her favorite nun's dress; even Nigel, blind to defects as most lovers are, wished that she did not look so ill, for his mother's sake. Lady Strath, meanwhile recovering from her little shock of surprise, rose from the sofa to meet her; her kiss was not very warm, certainly, but neither was it cold; and she took her hand kindly enough, as she seated her beside her; but Barbara wanted it for St. Ronans, and after that she took good care to have it in her own keeping—it would not have pleased her to have sat hand in hand with Lady Strath.

"I do hope that we shall be good friends, Barbara," she said, this slight movement not being lost on her.

"Friends—oh, yes, I should say there could be no doubt of that."

"That depends on what you mean by the word. Do you know, my dear child, Nest is going to leave me soon: I shall want you to be my daughter in her stead, Barbara." Barbara colored painfully, all the more that St. Ronans was so anxiously watching her.

"I must not say anything that is not quite true. I am my father's daughter; I shall never be anybody else's, Lady Strath:" then as though ashamed of her coldness, "of course I shall hope to be good to him, and to you too."

"I am sure I hope so, my dear," was the reply, in a very dignified tone. "I don't know how high Nigel stands in your estimation, but at least you have promised to become his wife; for his sake, then, I trust that you and I will get on well together."

"Of course we shall, Lady Strath."

"He is my only son," she continued, the proud tone breaking a little; "perhaps we have no right to make idols of our children; if we do, they are sure to disappoint us. I ought not to say so, you being what you are to him, but he could have married anybody."

"I know I am not worthy of him," was Barbara's sad answer. All through the interview, she never raised her voice once above the quiet subdued key

in which she had first spoken; she looked a little model of grave patience, sitting with her hands folded together in her lap, and that touching droop of the lip that one sees in a child; "indeed, I know that I am not worthy of him, Lady Strath."

St. Ronans stepped forward, and laid his hand smilingly on her shoulder.

"Hush, dear! What nonsense, mother! I will not have you treat Barbara to a panegyric on my virtues; you will be drawing up a whole list of them presently, and forgetting the crowning honour of the whole."

"What is that, Nie?"

"That Barbara has accepted me;" and as he saw his mother's lip curl involuntarily, he went on half-jestingly, "what would have been the use if all the eligible young ladies in the kingdom would have had me, while Barbara continued to say me nay?"

Lady Strath was only a woman; she looked at Nigel, and then at the demure figure in the grey dress, and then back again at Nigel, as though she almost doubted the evidence of her senses.

"Nie, I do believe you are crazy."

"You have told me that before, madre mia," with a mocking bow. "Barbara, what makes you keep your eyes in your lap this morning? I verily believe you have grown afraid of me, since last evening;

or my mother has mesmerised you. Have you given her Nest's message, mother?"

"No, I forgot. Nest sent you her dear love, Barbara, and I am to give you this note from her: when you read it, you will find that she has asked a great favor."

"A favor, Lady Strath?"

"Yes; she wants you to be her bridesmaid. It is to be a very quiet wedding, and indeed you must not refuse," for Barbara's face looked dubious; "Nigel thinks, we all think, that you owe this duty to Nest."

"Very well, Lady Strath."

"Do you mean you will come?"

"Of course I will come, if it is my duty, and Nigel wishes it; but I tell you frankly, that I would rather not." Then Lady Strath embraced her, and called her a dear child; but her manner was rather forced; she was thinking what the county would say to this public recognition of Barbara as her son's *fiancée*. Still the wedding was a safe matter for discussion, and so Lady Strath had a good deal to say on the subject of the trousseau, and the oddities of that dear good-natured Geoffrey—she was thawing visibly over it; but Barbara only answered in monosyllables, and Nigel seemed "bored." Both felt it a relief when Dr. Heathcote came in, and Nigel was at liberty to invite Bab to a stroll in the

garden. The air was reviving, and she followed him willingly; it was pleasant to get away from Lady Strath at all events, and even Nigel looked a different creature as he threw himself on the grass beside her.

"Well, Barbara," he said, taking her two hands, and stooping to obtain a better view of her face, "I am afraid it has not been very satisfactory on the whole."

She shook her head.

"It is not always very easy to get on with the dear old madre: she has got her crochets, Barbara; and one is, that no one is good enough for this precious son of hers."

"I think she is right, Nigel."

"Oh, you do, do you? I did not expect such a compliment from you, Barbara mia;" but his mischievous glance could not win a smile from her.

"I mean," she answered gravely, "that what she said was perfectly true, and you might have married anybody; and it does seem rather hard of course, to her, that you should throw away all advantages, and choose such an insignificant little creature as me."

"Hold there, Barbara; those observations are personal, and reflect discredit on my good taste. Insignificant indeed!"

"But, Nigel."

"Well?" pressing her hands tightly.

"I think I am sorry for your mother, she is so disappointed—justly so, I believe; and," rather timidly, "I am sorry for you too."

"I am not to be pitied, I assure you."

"Oh, but you are: you don't think so now of course, but one day you may come to look at it all so differently. Nigel, if you ever get tired of me, if I disappoint you, I mean, and you find out that it is not really Barbara that you love, I hope you will come and tell me so; I shall not hold you to your word."

"You dare to say this to me now!" closing her quickly in his arms.

"Why should I not dare? I am only speaking for your good. Oh," with a little thrill of pain, "I am afraid Leigh is right, after all, when he said I had bewitched you." Nigel's laugh was pleasant to hear.

"You delicious little piece of gravity, did Leigh say that? What a clever fellow! Of course you have: don't I tell you you are perfection in my eyes."

"How I wish you would not talk so, St. Ronans."

"St. Ronans, too! You naughty child, do you know I have a great mind to punish you?"

"I cannot help it," she said, pathetically; "if you only knew how I long for the old St. Ronans, again. I don't want to hurt you; but," with a little burst, "if you would only not praise me in this

dreadful way—if you would talk to me as Bab's master used to talk."

It was comical to see his face.

"You mean that I am not to make love to you, I suppose."

"I don't know what I mean; but, oh, I am so tired, St. Ronans."

"I will not have it, Barbara: Nigel or Nie, if you will. I shall have to impose a forfeit. No, I cannot promise not to make love: do you know, I had such a longing while my mother was prosing, to take you away, and keep you to myself. I wish I could make everybody see you with my eyes."

She smiled faintly, the saddest smile.

"Do you know what I was saying to myself all last night, over and over again—'I am yours, Nigel.' I was half afraid it was a dream, after all: I wanted to see and to touch you, to make sure that it was reality."

"Are you sure now?"

"I don't know; there is something uncanny about you, Barbara. Do you remember I used to call you the Brownie? Ah, well, I shall be more assured presently, when I set the seal to my words;" and he took her hand again, as he spoke. She looked up at him quickly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, and then grew ashamed of her question.

His answer was a silent one.

What! he was gilding her chains already: she must wear the badge of her new slavery. Very pale grew the downcast face, as the opals and diamonds shone on the little hand: very gravely, though with a child's simplicity, she yielded to his caresses; had he not a right?

Perhaps Nigel saw something in that passive endurance that made his heart ache, despite his happiness, for he presently became almost as quiet as she. He had sworn in his unholy passion that, willingly or unwillingly, she should be his wife; he had her now; was she not beside him, this real flesh-and-blood Barbara? had he not touched them all, the little soft hands, the dark wistful eyes, the brown ripples of hair? was not her voice still sweet in his ears? What did it mean, then, this vague yet ever-increasing conviction that she had escaped him? that it was the soul that he wanted and loved, the pure heart, the simple, stainless affection?

Was it not her wraith, after all? Where were the quaint bright looks, the wayward fanciful words, the fitful humors of the Barbara he had wooed? Her gentleness surprised him, her ready obedience touched him with quick pain; he would rather she had scorned his caresses, than accepted them with such sadness; never once had the color deepened in her pale face, never once had the quiet voice

relaxed from its monotony. His love-making was distasteful, but she bore it, as she would bear everything; he had reproached her for her want of generosity, and had stimulated her to this sacrifice, tempting her in her hour of weakness, and triumphing through her pain, but already his pleasure grated like ashes between his teeth, his whole soul craved after the only thing she could not give him—the entirety of her faithful heart.

Barbara, waking up from a reverie, read the dissatisfaction in his face: she knew that gloomy look well; it always moved her to pity.

"Oh Nigel, why do you look like that? I knew I should not make you happy."

He turned to her with a sudden fond movement.

"My darling, I beg your pardon; am I neglecting you?"

"No—hush, hush! oh, what was that?" she went on with rapidly whitening lips; "was it my fancy? I thought I heard Norman's step in the shrubbery."

"Well, so you did: you need not look so frightened. I think he saw us too; anyhow he passed on quickly. He is grown dreadfully unsociable of late."

She pressed her face on her hands without speaking.

"I think he might have stopped to have congratulated us, don't you?—after I took the trouble to write to him too."

"You wrote to him? you told him about this?" she faltered.

"Of course I did: have you any objection, dear? He is my cousin, you know."

"No; it is quite right—quite right;" then with a strange quiver of her lips, "dear Nigel, you must forgive me, if I have not seemed myself this morning."

"That is the second time, since we have been engaged, that you have asked me to do that," he said, with a little impatience in his voice.

"O Nigel, are you vexed with me already? Indeed I will try to be all you wish, if you will only be patient: you must be patient for my sake as well as for your own."

Her gentleness touched him in spite of himself.

"If you will only love me a little," he asked humbly.

"Well, do I not?—oh, a great deal, a great deal more than you know; but that does not keep us from being unhappy, it seems. If I am hiding anything from you, it is only for your good;" for her one secret galled and fretted her like a concealed lie. "You must be very patient with me, dear, for sometimes I feel no better than a sick child—oh so very, very tired!" and then, greatly to his surprise, she dropped her head on his arm in an uncontrollable fit of weeping.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FAIRY PRINCE.

" He brings me costly treasures,
And pearls to deck my brow ;
The cold world and its pleasures
Are the themes he speaks of now.
But little joy they render,
If they sparkle 'mid my tears ;
Can the heart be won by splendor
That has loved in earlier years ? "

Carpenter.

THE days went on, bright autumn days, but Barbara did not find her life much easier to her; every morning when she woke she braced herself up to fresh efforts and fresh trials of patience, taking herself to task for her faint-heartedness, and measuring each duty by her own puny strength; but when evening came, she always told herself that she had done badly—that she had utterly failed—that Nigel's great love was a reproach to her indifference; at such times her remorse was lively, and she would make all manner of promises of amendment, and yet when the morrow came there were only new failures.

For she was forming ropes out of sand, and no wonder she found it wearying work.

It was not so much that she shrank from the sacrifice that she had made, as that it seemed to crush her; she was as one who was fettered hand and foot, she could not move freely, her power of volition seemed gone; if she had any will at all, she hardly knew it; all her bright energies languished, —it was as though her individuality had departed with her freedom; like the half-tamed bird to which Nigel had compared her, she drooped and pined on the giddy perch on which he had placed her, and as yet she knew no sweetness of song in her captivity.

But weary as her daily life was, its bitterest ingredient was Norman's resolute avoidance of her; she began to crave for his presence with an intensity of longing that was perfectly repellent to her better nature; and yet, the more she repressed this feeling, the stronger it grew; she was hungering for a word, for a look, for a touch of his kindly hand: it was not only that life was barren of all joy without him, but that his friendship was a necessity to her; she wearied after him with a strange persistent longing, all the greater that she was compelled to hide it.

But, argue against it as she would, she could not shut her eyes to the fact that he never crossed her path if he could help it; indeed, as time went on,

his avoidance of her was almost singular: without word or warning, he seemed to have assumed that that last conversation of theirs was to all intents a final one, so completely had he dropped out of their little sphere; to Barbara it now bore all the solemnity of a farewell,—perhaps he wished her to think so; and so great at all times was his influence over her, that though she was wearing her heart out, just to exchange a word with him again, she no more thought of breaking down the barrier that he had chosen to put up between them, or of seeking him on some neutral ground of her own devising, than she would have thought of telling out all her pain to her lover.

He would have it so—therefore there was no help for it; the heavy door that shut out the surgery from Heathcote House was as impassable an obstacle as the sandy deserts of Sahara,—she would as soon have crossed the one as the other. He might as well have been in America as Sunningford, for she never met him: once indeed she nearly came upon him in a lane near St. Ronans, but before she could find out whether he saw her, he had put his horse into a canter, and was out of sight in a minute. Coming out of church also, one rainy Sunday, she saw him just as she was getting into the Straths' carriage; Nigel called to him gaily to come with them, but he only lifted his hat with

a glance that included all the party, and joined Hester. Barbara scarcely spoke a word to anyone the remainder of that day. Nor were things much more satisfactory with Mrs. Strath; on hearing of the engagement, she had written a warm letter to her nephew, and another to Barbara, full of expressions of affection and kind wishes for their happiness; but, notwithstanding, Barbara felt herself a little disappointed: there was kindness, but no approbation; the whole tone of the letter manifested little pleasure, but a great deal of surprise; and Barbara also fancied a slight amount of offence was taken, that she had left her so completely in the dark. Barbara's reply was curt, but overflowing with love: she could not go down to Oakleigh Cottage, but she begged Mrs. Strath to come and see her at Heathcote House; she had underlined the request, urging it very warmly. There was no reply to this; but a week afterwards Mrs. Strath did come, but only on parish business with Hester.

Barbara was just going to St. Ronans when Mrs. Strath was anounced; but she resolved upon keeping Nigel waiting, and went in at once to receive her with open arms, but her friend had very little to say to her.

"I suppose one ought never to be surprised at anything, Barbara, but I confess I have been utterly astonished;" and her kiss was a little colder than

usual as she said this; it needed no more to show that Mrs. Strath had small sympathy with Barbara's choice.

Bab hung her head very sadly.

"Everybody is surprised. I do not think that one, even among my own people, think me worthy of him, unless it be Daddie." Her humility, her sadness, could not fail to mollify her friend.

"That was not my meaning, Barbara. I think you quite worthy of my nephew, as far as that goes; Nigel's poor health is a far greater obstacle in my eyes."

"He is much stronger, Mrs. Strath."

"Perhaps so, my dear. Well, it is done now; but everyone is free to hold their own opinion, and I cannot think you have been wise; but your father knows best. Everybody, Norman even, treats Nigel as a hypochondriac, but I don't know; and then neither of them have examined him." She broke off her vague rambling at seeing Barbara's look of alarm.

"What are you talking about, Mrs. Strath?" she asked with some astonishment.

"Nothing, my dear; ah, well, sufficient for the day. But if you had asked my opinion, Barbara, which you did not; but perhaps, after all, I should have done no good: you see, I don't think it quite kind that you have let me be so taken by surprise.

You did not even tell me of it yourself; but I suppose young things like you don't like talking about their feelings; and I am only a cross-grained old woman, my dear. But things have not turned out quite as I wished them;" and then, to Barbara's distress, she wiped a tear or two away.

"Dear Mrs. Strath, are you angry with me? have I disappointed you?"

"Angry, my dear! nay, I have no right, I am sure; I ought to say, I am very glad for your sake; such an advantageous match, too."

"Oh! pray don't speak of it like that."

"Why should I not? that is how the world speaks of it. Dear, dear, you will be my niece now; of course it is the best, and all that." But there was a look of trouble on Mrs. Strath's face, as she uttered these little common-places, that sorely perplexed Barbara; she was certainly as affectionate as ever, but her manner was changed.

"I am sorry that I have not your approbation," said Barbara, speaking faintly, as her friend rose to take leave.

"My dear, how you talk! Of course you have it: I think it will be a grand thing for Nigel, your marrying him; you will do him good, and keep him up to his duty."

"I don't feel much like doing anyone good," sighed Barbara.

"Oh! you must not say that; it is wrong to depreciate yourself. By-the-bye, my dear, you don't look quite well; your eyes are harassed and worn. Nigel is rather an excitable lover, I expect, you must keep him quiet; and take my advice, Barbara, don't have a long engagement—a long engagement will wear him to death."

"Is that all you have to say to me, Mrs. Strath?"

"I will keep anything else till I see you next. And oh! I forgot: Norman desired me to say everything kind to you; he is very busy, quite torn to pieces just now, poor boy. Now I must settle my business with Hester. I won't keep you any longer, my dear, or Nigel will never forgive me; there, God bless you! Keep up your looks, for they belong to him now;" and she embraced Barbara again with moist eyes, but still with that dissatisfaction in her voice and manner: the girl looked back at her wistfully, as she went out.

"She is my adopted mother, and I have disappointed her; I disappoint everybody. I wonder if she wanted me for Norman? perhaps she did. But why need she be hurt?—how could I marry him against his will? And then she has never asked me to the cottage; I do not believe she wants me, and, if she did, I don't think I could even make up my mind to ask Nigel's leave to go there; it would not be right—not now, even if he would give me my liberty

for a few hours;" and Bab sighed bitterly, as she walked towards the fir-plantation. Perhaps her duty might have seemed easier, if Nigel had been a more reasonable lover; but his constant surveillance fretted her beyond endurance,—it was not too much to say, that he could not bear her out of his sight.

Strange as it might appear, that feeling or conviction to which we have alluded, and which first occurred to him when he sat in the garden beside her, on the day of their betrothal, always returned upon him with more or less force when she was absent from him, making him restless and uneasy. When they were together, so great was his affection, that her mere presence filled him with happiness; she might respond or not to his fondness,—every word, every look of hers, yielded him a certain content. But a few hours of absence seemed to affect him strongly: grave doubts and fantastic terrors, all manner of lover-like bugbears, possessed him; he would turn over her words in his mind, and pronounce them cold, or they had been not wanting in kindness, but uttered in a weary tone; she had looked tired or distraite, wanting in animation. At such times the remembrance of her ready obedience in trifles seemed to vex him; it was too like the obedience of one who has no interest to contest; he would have given worlds to hear her disagree with him, to see her rebel against some whim of his;

if he could have provoked one of their old arguments, it would have been joy to him,—a frown or two, the quick scornful curl of the lip, would have been better than the listless sweetness of her looks; how often astray, how lost she had appeared, when he was talking to her, and he had been angry with her, with a fierce lover-like anger; and then it had gone to his heart, to hear how she had begged his pardon, as though she were a child, and he her master.

He always conjured up these fancies when alone; on such occasions he was so gloomy as to affront his mother; she felt there was no help for it, and that his was the very ecstasy of madness; she must humor it, she knew. But her jealousy of Barbara was almost a passion; and I do believe that these two women, about to be so strangely united, hated each other with as cordial a hatred as was consistent under the circumstances, none the less that Lady Strath hid hers under honeyed words and profusions of costly gifts, propitiatory to the reigning goddess, while Barbara, on her side, contented herself with the scantest courtesy, considering her relations with Lady Strath as strangely humbling ones, seeing that they obliged her to receive her gifts, and to make no outward show of her indifference.

For the rest, she resigned herself to her position with the best grace she could muster, but she sighed

after her lost freedom with a never-ceasing regret. No more strolls in the pine-woods; since the day she had lain there in her misery, she had ceased to haunt them; she had lost all her desire for country rambles, since she and Ben must not take them alone.

Instead of that, there were long mornings in the studio, where Barbara would gladly have forgotten herself and her love too in her work, if he would have allowed her; but he was always harassing her with interruptions, coaxing her to leave off painting and attend to him. Her only periods of rest and comfort were during Nest's brief visits; but Nigel never seemed to encourage them, and Nest had far too great a fellow-feeling to intrude her society on her brother where it was not wanted. Lady Strath had less compunction, and came often; but her presence only gained black looks from Nigel; he used to betake himself to his book silently, and leave the burden of conversation on Barbara, listening all the time to every remark that fell from her lips in an half-anxious, half-irritable way that made her nervous. When his mother was gone, he would take her to task for her reserved manners, or her coldness, or her want of response, for which it was not always quite easy for her to excuse herself; she would make promises to him of doing better the next time, of which promises she always

fell lamentably short; it grieved her to hear his reproaches, knowing them to be true; it was hard upon him, she felt, idolising his mother as he did, to see this estrangement between them, and yet with two such natures how was an alliance possible?

She found out, after all, that Nigel was easier to manage when she had him alone; but the tedium of this perpetual love-making was terrible. A morning of broken work was sure to be followed by an afternoon of lounging in the Heathcote garden; sometimes she got him to come in and read to her and her sisters as they sat at work, but not often, and then the book was soon discarded: he was in too wiry and restless a state for steady occupation; he liked the *dolce far niente* better; and worse still, he wanted Barbara to like it too—Barbara, who declared that work and freedom were the breath of life to her.

Her days passed more quickly when Nigel taught her to ride; that, in spite of all drawbacks, was delightful to her; at last he had found something on which she might manifest genuine enthusiasm: it was touching to see his happiness when he first discovered this for himself.

Of course, there were no bounds to his generosity. A new horse found its way into the St. Ronans stables—one that a princess might have ridden; and Nigel was at great pains to procure her a habit

from London. Norman used to see them riding out together as he initiated the new assistant in his duties; through the low surgery window, he could see Nigel mounting her, and taking the little foot in his hand; by-and-by they would canter past: he would see it all—the pretty bay mare, and the dark-blue habit, and the long feather drooping over the felt hat, and just a glow of color in the pale face as she patted the neck of her new favorite, Ben leaping up open-mouthed at her side. "You may enter Mrs. Deanes's name again in the ledger, Mr. Johnson; and there is the blister to be sent for Hartstone's boy directly;" and Norman would put on his gloves in a grave professional manner. Well, he had seen her again; he saw her every day, though she did not know it. He would carry that picture of her through the tedium of a wakeful night. "How brave she looked in her new habit; and with what a pretty color and smile she had leaned over to speak to Ben: how was he to know that the color was transient, and that her heart was sinking even now with disappointment, that she had passed the surgery windows and that the shrubs had hidden him from her sight?

Others besides Norman watched the little cavalcade that left the doctor's house daily. Sunningford and Durnford were making themselves very busy with the Heathcotes' affair; Barbara's engagement

with the rich Mr. Strath spread like wild fire over the place, and there was some truth in the doctor's joke, that female curiosity was filling up the gaps in his visiting-list; one or two had already thrown over Murray and gone back to their old friend, and many were the delicious little bits of gossip that these returned prodigals enjoyed in their conversations with the doctor, and which were of course retailed to the Murrayites over many a maidenly tea-table. The tide of popular favor, always fickle, was already turning in favor of the Heathcotes; and so strong was the benevolence of present feeling, that several were heard to declare, speaking under their breath, that there was a certain person, not to be mentioned in polite society, who was said to be not quite so black as he was painted; to which they added various shrugs and knowing nods, in which ringlets had a grand play, all going very far to prove that Norman, for whom this flattering comparison was supposed to be drawn, might have ventured somewhere on the strength of his cousinship, if he had not chosen to become every day more surly and unbearable.

Dr. Strath gave a grim laugh when this slight indication of popular opinion reached him; but if Sunningford and Durnford had put themselves in sackcloth and ashes, and eaten their own words in due penance for their slanders, he would have heard

them out, and then turned his back upon them with a rough word or two, as he was doing now. One or two backsliders from the paths of integrity had been full of remorse when they heard that they had driven him away, and had come up boldly confessing their transgressions, and with peace offerings in their hands; but he had received them with that black look that they knew so well, taking their apology haughtily, as though it were his right, but refusing to have anything to do with the peace offering, declining it, indeed, in words so pungent, so altogether unsavory to their mental palate, that they had quitted his presence, feeling themselves unable to keep in it any longer, and if not positively hating him, going very near to that Christian frame of disposition.

But, to say the truth, he was so sick of himself, that he did not care to hide that he despised them heartily, that he was washing his hands of them, shaking off the dust of Sunningford as though it were not worthy of his footsteps; he wanted to rid himself of a place and people that were alike odious to him. He could hardly brook the necessary delays; the days had passed into weeks, and yet he had not gone the whole round of his farewells; he was leaving one or two to the very last—one he believed that he should only find time for when his horse was brought round to the door.

Sunningford then felt itself rather in the position of an aggrieved penitent in relation with Dr. Strath; he had as much as told them that their sin was of too black a die to be pardoned; all their humiliation therefore must be reserved for the other doctor, who was much given to receive all such offenders with open arms.

Every one who had a right to call on the Heathcotes, and very many who had none, left cards, or made good their entrance. There was quite a block of country equipages one afternoon in the narrow lane, and I don't know how many pairs of eyes, "blue, black, and grey," to stare at poor Bab; a few timid gazelles contented themselves with a mere inspection and soon went away, but others remained behind to take mental stock, turning Barbara metaphorically inside out in their attempts to find out why Nigel Strath had chosen her.

Of course there were divisions of opinion, those who were the fault-finders of society vowing that there was nothing in her—positively nothing, and that that young Strath must have been crazy to choose such a little nonentity, and others more benevolent and kind-hearted discovering all kinds of ideal beauties—she was not pretty, but she was piquante, original, rather out of the common, there was something distinguished in her grey dress, she had a dimple, bright eyes, &c., the fact being that, with

the best possible intentions, they hardly knew what to say. It would have been difficult to decide whether Barbara or Lady Strath suffered most under these inspections: to the latter indeed they were simply unendurable; she was ashamed of Barbara, ashamed of her son's choice, but she bore such shame with the grandeur of a stoic, or rather a woman of the world; she did her best with the scanty materials allotted to her; she could not add to Barbara's stature, or make her grave little face one whit prettier, but she took her dowdiness in hand, resenting it as a personal slight to Nigel; she bought pretty dresses, and had them made up in the newest fashion, and presented them with appropriate ornaments, and she condescended to take her maid into confidence on the subject of Miss Heathcote's hair, beguiling her into her dressing-room on one occasion, and spending the time to such purpose that Nigel hardly recognised the beautiful *crêpé* hair for his Bab's brown furze-bush.

Barbara accepted the dresses and wore them dutifully, but she hated them, she dropped tears of secret vexation and humiliation over the muslin and silk folds; Nigel bought her a rich Genoese velvet one day, Lady Strath had it trimmed with point lace; it suited Bab admirably, and she looked like a little queen in it; she took it almost without a word, and wore it that evening, that he might feast

his eyes with his rare gift, but there was a look upon her face all the time as though she were a victim about to be led out to sacrifice, whom they were begarlanding for their own amusement. Once she would have revelled in her velvet gown; now the pomp and weight of it seemed to drag her down, as did the glittering chains, and bracelets, and rings with which he loaded her.

She lost patience at last, and they had a battle royal over it. Barbara threatened to lay them all away, and take to her grey dress again.

"You loved me when I wore little else," she said to him: "I cannot take any more of yours or your mother's presents; let me keep them and wear them when I am your wife. It is not fitting for Dr. Heathcote's daughter to wear velvets and jewels. Oh, do be reasonable, Nigel; if you had any generosity, you would spare me;" and she actually shed tears of hurt pride as she said this. But Nigel was inexorable.

"It is your own fault that you are not my wife now," he answered her, rather gloomily; "but I cannot help it, if you are so indifferent to my happiness: your very pride shows you have no love for me, or you would not so scorn my gifts."

"I do not scorn them; it is very unkind of you to speak so, Nigel; and my pride is a right and proper pride. It is not because I am going to marry you,

that you need heap me with things as though I were your slave, it is treating me as a slave;" she went on with burning cheeks, on which the tears were already dry, and there was a quick passionate choke in her voice as she answered him; she looked more like the Barbara of old, than she had for a long time.

Her spirit pleased Nigel even though he was determined to have his way; he was clasping a bracelet on her arm when she had first remonstrated, and now he toyed lightly with the pendant as he answered her.

"I think it is I who am the slave, Barbara, I wonder what lover would bear what I do daily, I put my neck under your little foot, and you reward me by trampling on my tenderest feelings. I verily believe if I were to leave you to yourself, you would never speak to me."

"For shame, Nigel!"

"Oh, for shame, is it. I do think I have linked my heart to an ice maiden, my love cannot warm you, I do not know whether my caresses or my gifts are least tolerable."

"Nigel! Nigel!"

"And there you sit as demure and grave as a little Portia; you are shocked now, you are always in judgment against me. What have I said now to offend you?"

"If you would only be reasonable!" she sighed.

"Well, am I not? look here, Barbara, my own darling, I hate to see you cry; if you would let me, I would kiss every tear away, perhaps if I did, they would not be so ready to come; what is that restless look for?"

"If you would only let me go on with my work?" she implored.

"Let you! not a bit of it! I do not think I shall set you free for the whole morning, as a punishment for your ingratitude, don't you feel what a bad ungrateful child you have been?"

"I don't know, I dare say I have," she answered wearily.

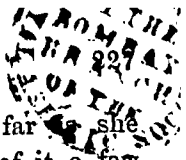
"Well, are you going to promise not to do so any more, do you know you have hurt me very badly, Barbara?"

"I did not mean to do that," she said penitently, as her eye fell on the brilliants.

"I dare say not! you were only so full of your wicked little pride; don't be proud with me any more, Barbara, I cannot bear it; tell me you will never refuse my gifts again?"

"Oh, Nigel! I never dreamt of refusing it, and so beautiful as it is; I only begged you, as I do still, not to give me any more!"

"Oh we shall see about that," he answered wilfully; and then let her go on with her work; but



Barbara knew that it was a defeat, as far as she was concerned; she was only too sure of it a few days afterwards, when he told her very coolly, that his mother would furnish her trousseau; it was evident from his manner that he expected another scene, and was rather prepared to enjoy it; but Barbara disappointed him, she took it very quietly, having made up her mind that it was her duty to submit for her father's sake, but her changing color, and deeply bitten lip, showed what it cost her.

She had found out too, by this time, that Nigel was determined to have his way in everything; if they were to enjoy anything like a moderate amount of peace, her will must yield to his; she had gained one victory in the early days of their engagement, and she found she must make the most of her triumph, for no other would be hers.

She had insisted on a postponement of their marriage, and had carried her point too.

They had not been engaged a week, and she was still much shaken in spirits, and with unequal nerves; in a state indeed, in which any older and more experienced man than Nigel, would have applied himself to cheer and soothe her back to at least tranquillity, instead of fretting and exhausting her overtasked feelings till she was on the verge of fever; it was against all reason, then, and certainly

against generosity, knowing on what plea she had suffered herself to be engaged to him, that he should press for an immediate marriage with her, on the excuse that a warmer climate suited his health; he actually wanted her to marry him before the autumn was out, that they might winter in Italy.

The girl turned as white as a sheet, when this proposition was made to her, and for the first time in her life, went into real hysterics; Nigel was greatly alarmed of course, and only thought of soothing her agitation, but as soon as she was recovered, he enlisted the Doctor's sympathies on his side, and begged him to use his influence with Barbara.

"It is very much like asking me to cut my own throat, Nigel," said the Doctor ruefully. "I cannot press the child into a sudden marriage against her will, but I will do what I can," and then he went off exhorting him to patience. He was all on Nigel's side when he went up to her room, but before he had been many minutes with her she had twisted him round: the state of wretchedness in which he found her would have gone to any father's heart.

"Come, come, this will never do, Barbara," he said very decidedly, as he felt her dry fevered hand, "we must send the young Prince about his business if he is going to worry you like this," and then he sat down on the bed and took her in his arms, and

spoke to her in his grave wise way till she had swallowed down her bitter sobs and lay as quiet on his breast as though she was the little child he had often hushed to sleep.

"Now what is it all about, Barbara? have you got tired of your lover, my dear?"

"No, oh no," she gasped out, with a secret conviction that she was not speaking the truth; "but Daddie," clinging to him, "don't let him marry me yet and take me away from you to that dreadful Italy."

"You shall not marry him at all if you do not wish it," returned the Doctor with a twinge of pity for his motherless girl; "you are not to marry him only for our good, remember that, Barbara."

"No, of course not," she replied, very much alarmed lest he should have discovered her secret, "I am not finding fault with Nigel for his own sake; he is too good to me, Daddie, but, oh, do ask him to be patient?"

"He must be patient, my Barbara," he returned, much displeased, "I will not have any child of mine harassed like this."

"He did not mean to harass me," she exclaimed eagerly, "it was only his love, I know, but I could not help my stupidity; I wish he were not quite so fond of me, Daddie, that's all."

"And what am I to tell him, you vain little

puss," returned her father, half in earnest, but still holding her tightly.

Barbara thought a moment, her forehead puckered with pain.

"You must ask him to be patient, dear father, tell him that I am not very strong just now, and not fit to cope with such thoughts; let him leave me this winter in peace; in the spring, if he likes, I will marry him."

"Come, that's reasonable, he must agree to that," said Dr. Heathcote; and then he went down to the impetuous lover; he had some trouble with him, however, but in the end he was forced to yield. But Barbara was obliged, as we have said, to make the most of this victory; in every other point she found he was too much for her, as in the case of the velvet and jewels, and before long she found that he had another and scarcely less grave demand to make, which would cost her some trouble to refuse, and in which it would be extremely doubtful whether his will would not prevail in the end.

CHAPTER X.

"WHEN WE TWO PARTED."

"Though far and fast the rapid moments run,
Thy bosom heaveth not, thine eyes are clear.
Silent, perhaps a little sad at heart
She is. I am her friend, and I depart."

Jean Ingelow.

It was the day fixed for Dr. Strath's departure from Sunningford, when Barbara went down as usual to St. Ronans.

Norman had kept his plans so close that only his mother was aware that it was his intention to leave that night. Even Dr. Heathcote was ignorant of the precise day, not knowing indeed till that very morning, when his partner and he were having their last ride together; Barbara therefore was quite unaware of the pain that that day had in store for her, her heart was even a little less heavy than usual as the great gates swung back on her, bringing a plentiful rain of crimson and yellow leaves in noiseless patter on her head; and she crossed the lawn more quickly than was her wont, in order to gain the

side entrance to the studio; she was wanting to finish a piece of work in which she was much interested, and as she was a little before her time hoped to find the studio unoccupied.

The Fates were propitious for once, no St. Ronans was there, only plenty of cool mellow light and Barbara's unfinished canvas temptingly displayed on her easel; off went her hat and cloak and she was soon deep in her work; for with all her miseries Bab was too true an artist not to feel her heart glow with something like happiness when the palette was in her hand; when well into her subject she almost forgot her troubles, though they were pretty sure to come back with the first jar of Nigel's voice.

One hour passed and then two, and still she worked on, revelling in her freedom and keenly alive to the sweetness of the flowers with which Nest always dressed her brother's room, taking now and then refreshing peeps at the cool ferns, and the long shady lawn sloping down to the shining water, or pausing to listen to some bird singing in the woods; her work was delicious, and she was almost smiling over a bit of delicate coloring, when Nigel's light footsteps came behind her and his hands on her shoulder made her turn round to greet him.

He enjoyed her start, and above all the glimpse of the smile he had caught.

"My pupil has been working hard, I see, while her

master has been playing truant; your piece is getting on famously, Barbarina *mia*; it will be your best."

"I think it will be," she returned with a little play of dimples at his praise, "are not the old woman's wrinkles famous?" and she was stretching out her hand for her palette again, but he stopped her.

"That will do for to-day, I want to talk to you, Barbara." The dimples went in again quickly.

"Only five minutes more," she pleaded earnestly, "do let me finish that bit of the red cloak, Nigel; it will only take me five minutes, indeed it will not."

"Very well, have your own way," he answered good-humoredly, and he leant over her chair, and watched her, very patiently for him, while the five minutes doubled and trebled themselves; nay, when she had finished, he even took the trouble to touch up her work, pointing out a defect here, and an oversight there, in his old way; praising the whole, too, in no measured terms, and vowing that one of her pictures should be exhibited before the next year was out; Barbara could almost have believed it was her own St. Ronans come back.

"Well, can you listen to me now?" he asked at last, as she took a lingering look at her canvas, and as she nodded in assent, he drew a chair towards him and leant over it facing her.

"Don't you wonder what has become of me all

this time?" he began; "why, I've been positively two hours away from you."

"I thought it a long time," she observed quietly.

"Did you? well, you did not take my absence much to heart it seems, though I was fussing and fretting to get back to you. My mother decoyed me into her dressing-room, and there was no getting away; have you heard of this new plan of hers?" and as Barbara looked up in surprise, "I mean about our spending the winter in London."

"She has not spoken to me about it," she returned, quickly.

"No! Well, I suppose she has left it for me, then; and now I want to know your opinion. I have been thinking over it all this while, and I do feel that I ought not to oppose her."

"Of course you ought not to oppose her; is that what you wanted me to say?"

"Partly, but, forgive me if I touch on a delicate subject. You know, Barbara, that this," hesitating, "this engagement of mine is not quite according to her wish; in fact she would have liked me to look higher."

"Of course she would. You need not be afraid to say this to me, Nigel."

"No, no; I am assured of your good sense, and after all you understand my mother however you may disagree with her. I wish you two could be

fonder of each other, but I suppose it will come in time. I don't know how things look to you, Barbara, but take it all in all, I think she is doing well by us; if you were a daughter-in-law of her own selection, she could not treat you better in any respect."

"I am not finding fault with your mother," returned Barbara, in a low voice.

"No, of course you are not. I am preaching now for my own benefit as well as yours. What I feel is, that she has given in to us in such an important matter, that I do not think it worth while for us to cross her in trifles."

"For you, I suppose you mean?"

"And you, too," he returned, with a slight frown. "I hope you do not wish to divide our interests. I do say that she has swallowed a very bitter pill for our sakes, in seeing me refuse a grand match; and I must say, also, that we ought to make all such swallowing as palatable as possible."

"Perhaps so, but I do not see what I have to do with it at present."

"You will see soon enough," he answered, impatiently. "I don't think you are much disposed to meet my ideas this morning. The fact is the madre has set her heart on wintering in London, and I see nothing to be gained by opposing her."

"Why does she wish it? It is not the season for London, is it, Nigel?"

"Of course not, child; what a question, and what an unfashionable little heathen you must be to ask it; pray keep such ignorance for me in future. I would not like it to reach my mother's ears."

"I am always displeasing you with my ignorance," she answered, humbly; on which he descended from his high perch at once, and asked her what his grand London friends would think of such a country-bred little rustic.

"They will think as everyone else does, that you have very bad taste, that is, if they ever have the opportunity of seeing me," at which speech Nigel shot a strange look at her, and went hurriedly on.

"Of course, this whim of the madre has nothing to do with fashion—the truth is, some Canada friends of hers are obliged to spend the winter in London, in order that an invalid son may have the benefit of London physicians. I think the poor fellow has to undergo some operation or other, and Colonel Ford has taken a house in Portman Square, and now they want my mother to come next door to them."

"Does she wish it very much, too?"

"Wish it? You should hear her, she is wild to go. You see this Mrs. Ford is a great crony of hers, and now the poor thing is in trouble and wants her so. The madre actually cried about it."

"I think you ought to go," observed Barbara, gravely.

"That's what I say, but I am glad you endorse my opinion. After all, Sunningford must be rather dull in the winter."

"It is not only that, but I think you ought not to disappoint your mother, she is so devoted to you. Of course, I shall be sorry to lose you, Nigel, but the winter will soon pass, and it is better to do one's duty."

Nigel's face of disgust was a study.

"Did I hear you right, Barbara? Surely you do not suppose that I have any intention of going to London alone."

"Alone, no. I thought you said your mother wished to go?" she returned, rather bewildered.

"My mother! What would be the good of a dozen mothers if I were to leave you behind? Of course, I shall stay at home if I cannot take you, Barbara."

Now it was Barbara's turn to look discomfited.

"To take me, Nigel?"

"Take you? Yes, of course. It is not Italy remember, and I do not ask you to marry me just yet, so you need not look so frightened. My mother may invite you to her house as her guest, I suppose. Anyhow, I am pretty sure of this, that London won't hold me if you are to be in Sunningford."

"Then I am afraid you must remain at home," she returned, very decidedly.

"But I cannot, I have given my word, would you have me break my word, Barbara? How are you ever to win my mother's affection if you oppose her in a plan on which she has set her heart? and if you do not go, there will be an end of the whole thing, and she will never forgive us."

"She will have to forgive us; but indeed, Nigel, you ought not to break your word. I think you owe this sacrifice to Lady Strath."

"Sacrifice, nonsense," he exclaimed, angrily; "you are not going to put me off like that. Of course, I must go, and you must go with me."

"Nigel, you are asking too much; I cannot leave my father."

"Now you are going to be obstinate and give me trouble. I do think you are the hardest girl that any lover had to deal with; you might as well tell me at once that you will have nothing more to do with me."

"That would be worse than foolish, and wicked in the bargain. You know that I try all day long to please you and you only, but I cannot please you in this."

"Why not? if I may ask."

"Because you are exacting from me a most unreasonable sacrifice—the sacrifice of my last winter at home; why, I may as well marry you at once, and go to Italy, as spend all those months in London."

"I wish you would marry me, you are harassing me to death. I shall never feel I have you safe till you are my wife."

"I have done nothing to deserve such a doubt," she returned, with sufficient haughtiness. He was trying her patience too far.

"There, now I have roused you in earnest—well, anything is better than that cold gentleness with which you generally answer me. I don't mind your frown one bit—not a bit. I say I wish you would marry me."

"Nigel, that is not the question."

"I know it is not, but what is the use of talking? I verily believe that you would not mind one bit if I went away to London all these months and left you."

"I am sorry if that be your opinion of me, but I cannot help it."

"Good heavens! Would anyone believe how she treats me? Barbara I wish I knew how to make you feel ashamed of yourself."

"I am often very much ashamed of myself, but not now; I am only obeying a plain duty in declining to leave my father."

"You had better ask him if he regards it in that light. I am inclined to think he might differ from you."

"Nigel, have you been to him? is that what has taken you so long?"

"Of course I have been to him," he returned, braving her reproachful look. "I hope I know my duty as well as you do yours, Barbara; I thought it right to consult him before I ventured on such a proposition to you."

"Well?" she inquired, doubtfully.

"You want to know his opinion? well, he was very dubious as to how you would take it, he knew what an obstinate little creature you were to manage. I begin to pity your belongings, Barbara."

"He thought I should not like it."

"He was afraid not; by the bye, he forbade me to use any persuasions; but you may set your mind at rest as to what he thinks of it, his opinion is that two or three months in London would do you no end of good."

"I don't believe it, Daddie never said that."

"My dear Barbara!"

"I beg your pardon, Nigel, but I think you have mistaken him."

"I think you have need to beg my pardon; you are using me strangely this morning; am I to repeat the rest of your father's speech or not?"

"If you please," she repeated, humbly.

"It is as you please, Barbara," he remarked, pointedly; "well, he said that he was very much distressed at the alteration in your looks, that you

were evidently far from well, and that my mother was right in saying the change would do you good; Leigh was just settling in his new home, and it would be pleasant for you to be near him; society would be just the thing for you, and it would be a grand opportunity for the madre to get your trousseau; of course he would be sorry to part from you for so long, but no doubt, he would be able to run up once or twice to see you and Leigh; that is all that I believe he said, Barbara."

She made no answer, but the harassed overstrained look had come back to her face.

"You did not mean to doubt my word, dearest, I am sure?"

"No, oh no; I am sorry I spoke so hastily."

"So you see that he is quite on my side?"

"Yes, I see that, and am grieved that such is the case, it makes it so much more difficult for me."

"There is no difficulty at all, the thing lies in a nutshell; you will please us all and go."

"I cannot."

"Barbara!"

"Oh, don't press me; I say I cannot. I am very, very sorry, Nigel, I would do almost anything for you but this; but I cannot give up my last winter at home, you should not ask it."

His only answer was to walk away from her in silence, and take up his book; poor Barbara had to

settle herself to her work again, with what spirit she might; but her efforts were fruitless, her zest gone; after half-an-hour's dull labor, she put away her brushes, and made preparations to go home. She had to come again to dinner in the evening, and then, doubtless, the subject would be renewed; she might as well go and talk her father over on her side, for she was determined that no anger on Nigel's part should be allowed to influence her; it was an unreasonable exaction, as she had told him, and she would not yield a jot.

So she thought as she put on her hat, and then she went across to him.

"I am going home now, Nigel."

"So I see," he returned, somewhat churlishly, and not looking up from his book; "as things are, I suppose I had better not come with you to the gate?"

"I do not know what you mean by 'things,' but I certainly do not wish you to stand on ceremony with me."

Then he rose, and put open the door for her.

"I am coming to dinner this evening," she said, still hesitating, and hardly daring to offer her hand.

"That is as you please, my mother will excuse you, I dare say; for myself, I may say that it is of very little moment to me whether you come or not, unless you have changed your mind."

Then she shook her head, marvelling at his ungraciousness, and went slowly down the lawn; never yet had he suffered her to go down to the gate unescorted, and now he had not even bade her goodbye; never before had they so nearly approached a quarrel; he was almost too agitated to speak to her, she saw that, and though he had made that excuse for his churlishness, she knew that the real reason was that his pain was on him, his lips had that darkness about them which always indicated a strong state of excitement; she had half a mind to turn back and say a soothing word to him, only that she knew it would be no good, and so she went sadly towards home.

She came upon her father just dismounting from his horse, he was in an evident hurry to have his dinner and be off again, but at her first word he consented to take a turn in the shrubberies, and listened patiently enough to all she had to say; but when it came to his turn to speak, he told her decidedly that he thought she ought to make up her mind to go.

"I hope you know that I am not speaking for myself, Barbara," he said, "I can ill afford to spare you, my dear; but the lad has been telling me all his difficulties, and how his mother's heart is set upon it, and upon my word, I don't see how you are to refuse him."

"But, Daddie, I might as well have married him at once, as he wished me."

"Well, I don't see that, dear, you wanted a little more breathing time, and very properly so too; but this is only a pleasant visit of a month or two, he has promised you shall be back by the end of February."

"And I am to marry him at the end of April?"

"Well, of course you are; there's a pretty face for Nigel to see. I can't quite take your side in this, Barbara; I don't deny, but that it is a great disappointment not to have you for your last winter at home; but as you are to live at least half the year at St. Ronans, we may think ourselves lucky on the whole; you see, if Nigel were an ordinary lover I would not dream of influencing you, he might take his chance like the rest; but I do feel, Barbara, as though we owe him more than we shall ever repay, and we can only look to you to cancel the debt."

"I see what you mean, Daddie."

"Of course you do. I am afraid the poor boy has been wounded; well, we won't talk of it any more just now, think over it this afternoon, and let me know at tea-time at what conclusion you have arrived."

"I shall be at St. Ronans before then."

"What! are you dining there? well, tell him then. I know very well what your answer will be," and

then he kissed her, and sent her on to the house to hasten the dinner. She had no appetite for it, however, and refused to sit down, and shut herself up in her den instead, to ruminate over her father's words.

She was in a dilemma certainly, even her father was against her, he had bidden her reconsider her objections, and had told her plainly that he knew well what her answer would be; and yet when the time came for her to dress for her evening visit to St. Ronans, her mind was still in the same tumult of indecision and trouble, her only clear thought being that in this matter Nigel was certainly using her very ill.

She had some intention of staying at home, and sending back word, when the carriage came, that she was tired or unwell, but Nigel would see through her pitiful excuse at once, and would most likely come after her; then she was at some pains to adorn herself and put on her velvet dress to propitiate him; telling herself all the time that her efforts would be fruitless; he would, in all probability, receive her gloomily, and humiliate her before them all by his silence and haughtiness of bearing; but the moment they were alone so overwhelming her with his anger and love, that there would be no peace for her but in yielding to his will.

She had almost made up her mind that she

would stay at home after all, when Connie burst into the room.

"Barbara, Norman wants to speak to you in the surgery."

Barbara was unclasping a bracelet, as Connie spoke, now it dropped to her feet, and she stooped to pick it up; perhaps it was the exertion that made her forehead so scarlet.

"To speak to me, are you sure, Connie?"

"Sure, of course I am, he wants to bid you good-bye, he has been in the drawing-room ever so long with Hester, and me; and nobody knew what had become of you, and now he can't wait any longer; do be quick, and run down, Barbara, he says he has not ten minutes to spare."

But Barbara did not hurry; perhaps, she could not.

"Did you say he was going away, Connie?" she asked, faintly.

"Going away, of course he is, everybody knows that, I should think, only you are so ridiculously taken up with the Fairy Prince, that you never hear anything; he has altered his mind, and means to go up to London by the night mail, I believe; now pray, Barbara, do not keep him any longer waiting."

"No, no, in the surgery, I think, you said," and then she went down; she stumbled on the first step,

and had to hold on by the balustrade, her knees trembled so, and on the door-mat she positively stood still a moment to take breath; it had come to that then, that he was going to bid her good-bye, that after all these weeks of silent avoidance of her, he was summoning her into his presence at the eleventh hour, the very last ten minutes he had to spare; and fool that she was, the thought of seeing his face again, was making her knees tremble under her.

The days were drawing in fast now, but there was plenty of light from the low surgery windows, in spite of the shades. Dr. Strath was writing at a table under the furthest window, the very one which the little cavalcade had so often passed. He rose at once on her entrance, and shook hands, almost as though they had met yesterday.

"I am sorry to have troubled you to have come down here, but I had been waiting some time in the drawing-room to bid you good-bye, and my minutes are numbered just now;" and as he said this, he began coolly to adjust his papers, laying aside some, and tearing up others as though a pressure of business were on him, and he had no leisure for such poor things as leave-takings; so at least Barbara thought as she stood silently by the table, with downcast eyes, trying hard not to tremble; how could she know what keen glances were bent

on her from under the rugged brows, as the waste-paper basket filled under his nervous fingers?

Could there have been a sorer, a more maddening sight to him, than Barbara standing there in her velvet dress? how well those rich grave folds suited her, never had he seen her look so piquante, and so quaintly lovely to his eyes; how fair the rounded white arms were under those lace ruffles, and the small full throat; how brave she looked decked in her lover's gifts, and adorned so tastefully by his hand. His heart was full of passion and anger, as he looked at her; Barbara had not been wrong in thinking he had misunderstood her, he was misunderstanding her to the last, most bitterly; the tidings of her engagement to Nigel, had been such a death-blow to him that it was doubtful whether he would ever recover from it; he had lost his faith in her; if she were not marrying Nigel for his money, or in fickleness, she was doing it at least out of revenge for what he had told her. Good heavens, she could see his trouble, she could let him tell her in vague words that he had loved her, and then turn round before his very eyes, and engage herself to Nigel, and within a few days too. Even if she preferred him, might she not have waited a little? if his Barbara could act like this, could he ever trust woman again? I verily believe, so unforgiving, so rigidly stern was the

man's nature, that if she had given up Nigel that instant, and had thrown herself into his arms and prayed him not to leave her, that he would have rebuked her fickleness with a severity of words that would have scared her, exacting from her a term of years, as the least proof of her repentance; and only then condescending to take her into his heart and show her the enduring greatness of his love. And so there was the bitterness of anger disguised beneath his silence as he watched her under his bent brows; while Barbara, shrinking from his manner and hardly daring to lift her eyes to his, was only remembering with a woman's unreasoning tenderness, that he was her love, her dearest, dearest friend, and that he was going to leave her.

The papers were put aside at last, and then he looked at his watch; the movement terrified her into speech.

"Are you really going to-morrow, Norman?" she stammered.

"No, to-night, I take the mail train to London; by this time to-morrow, we shall be at Southampton, and weighing anchor, I hope."

Bab shivered. "We, do you mean your mother, Norman?"

"My mother, of course not, what an idea," and he positively laughed that harsh laugh of his; "a woman of her age can't rough it as a strong man

can; no, Fred Lisle and I start together, and she will join us as soon as we have a decent berth for her."

"It is very hard for her—leaving you, I mean."

"It is not desirable, but it is the best arrangement that could be made under the circumstances; it might be dull for her perhaps if she were going to remain in Sunningford; but she has accepted an invitation from an old friend in Derbyshire, and there I think she will be tolerably comfortable."

"I am sure I hope so, and where do you think of settling, Norman?" She verily believed that her questions and his answers belonged to some dream.

"To New York, or rather the suburbs," he returned, briefly.

"To New York, that is a very very long way off, nearly the other end of the world, is it not?"

"Not quite, Barbara."

"Ah, well, I hope you will be happy; I do pray that you may be very very happy, Norman."

"Oh, as to that, I don't quite believe in happiness, you may wish me success if you will, we have a pretty certain prospect of that, I think."

"I am glad to hear it," she responded, almost inaudibly.

"Well, a man must eat to live, of course I shall rejoice in success for my mother's sake; Fred is anxious to take a wife over, and so he is likely to

work hard, but I must not stand talking any more, Barbara."

"Oh, must you go?" the words would come out in spite of herself.

"I have exceeded my time, now," he said, again looking at his watch; "I never see the use of prolonged leave-takings, I don't think the word good-bye is such a pleasant one that we should linger over it."

"I think it is the bitterest word in the whole language, Norman."

"Well, so do I; I would as lief cut my throat, as say it to some people," and then he took hold of her hand, squeezing it hard; perhaps the innocent sorrow in her eyes touched him; perhaps in that moment of parting, love over-balanced anger, but certainly, his tone was gentle, whatever his words might be.

But the little hand lay lifeless in his grasp; how was she to tell him that this was the bitterness of death to her?

"There it must be said—good-bye, God bless you, Barbara;" he pressed her hand almost convulsively for a moment, but he could take no kiss from Nigel's fiancée, though this parting might be for life; it would not have been in accordance with his stoicism. "Barbara, I do hope also that you may be happy;" and then he left her and went out in

the air, leaving her voiceless and dumb with misery. What, he had gone, and she had not spoken to him, she had not even returned his warm pressure. "Norman, Norman," oh this was indeed worse than death, worse than any death that she had ever heard of, that he should go away and leave her like this.

But she must not stand there brooding over her unutterable pain, she must put it away now; surely the nights and the days would be long enough; there were the carriage wheels coming up the lane; she took up her cloak and threw it over her, and went up into the hall. Connie was hovering about as usual, putting in fussy little touches to her dress, and giving vent every now and then to her rapturous admiration. Barbara thanked her mechanically and then stepped into the carriage; the door was closed on her, the fat bay horses trotted down the lane, two or three round eyed children nutting in the hedges gazed open-mouthed at the powdered footman and the grave little lady that sat inside; Barbara looked out at them and nodded, she noticed that one of the boys had torn his pinafore, and wondered if his mother would mend it, and then she looked up at the quiet autumn sky, with just a star or two twinkling in the blueness, and thought it strange that she should feel so giddy. "Do people feel giddy when their hearts are

broken," thought the poor child; "as mine is broken—as mine is surely broken," and then it came into her mind—that she might as well go to London now; anything would be better than Sunningford—Sahara, or the Rocky Mountains, or even Ebal, the Mount of Cursing, anything would be better than this little green nest of a place; and the grand house in Portman Square looked delightful under this comparison.

There was not a speck of color in her face when she entered the St. Ronans drawing-room; but Nigel was not there to notice it; Lady Strath was fanning herself on a couch and looking like a silken spread-eagle as usual, and Geoffrey was on the opposite couch whispering nothings into Nest's ears in a very loud voice; Nigel did not make his appearance till they were seated at the table, and then slipped into his place by Barbara with a muttered apology about "a headache;" he shook hands with Geoffrey, addressing him formally, but a glance and bow were all he vouchsafed Barbara; he looked both ill and ill at ease, in one of his worst moods apparently, and all dinner time his neglect of her was so pointed that of course every one remarked it.

Barbara saw they were all looking at them, and that it was clearly understood that they had had some quarrel. Lady Strath frowned, and did not condescend to her usual graciousness with her, and

Nest sidled up closer to her lover with a little fond whisper, which was speedily translated for everybody's benefit in Geoffrey's loud voice, dropped as he imagined into an affectionate lowness of tone.

"Of course we shall never quarrel, my little lady; why that would be a good joke, I could not fancy you looking sulky, Nest, like those two opposite—" here a secret pinch from Nest, a most extreme proceeding for her certainly, but to which she was reduced in her distress, silenced him; Nigel glared across at him, but Barbara was too utterly wretched to notice the gaucherie: it was rather a comfort to her to be allowed to sit silent, for every word seemed to come with such difficulty through her closed teeth; Nigel never noticed that she did not eat, or that there was anything much amiss with her, he was nursing up his own wrath and grievance, and at such times his blindness was excessive.

It was a most uncomfortable dinner, and even Nest was relieved when her mother gave the signal for their rising. Barbara turned round to see if Nigel were following her as usual, but he had gone back to his seat, and she heard him say to Geoffrey that he was going to have a cigarette on the terrace.

"Will you join me Geoff, old fellow?" but Geoffrey laughingly declined, he had to look over some house plans with Nest.

Lady Strath seated herself on the couch with her

most forbidding aspect, waiting for Barbara to join her, but Barbara had no such intention.

"If you will excuse me, Lady Strath," she said, "I think I will go out to Nigel on the terrace."

"Very well, you can do just as you like, of course, but I think you would be wiser to persuade him to come in, these autumn dews are very bad for him, and he has had one of his attacks to-day," and she looked at Barbara meaningly.

Barbara understood the reproach.

"You think I have been hard on him and made him ill," she replied, quietly, as though Lady Strath had spoken and not looked her thoughts. "Well, I must undo my mischief, that is all; I am going out to tell him now that I will accompany you to London."

All Lady Strath's vexed dignity vanished in a moment, for she embraced her and called her a dear child in her old way, and with her usual sweetness; and she even rung for her maid to bring down her own ermine cloak, that Miss Heathcote might not take cold on the terrace.

Barbara did not feel much like taking cold in the dry fever that was on her, but she submitted to be wrapped in the regal garment, and then went out into the starlight; there was very little light beyond the drawing-room windows, but at the darkest end of the terrace she could see the tiny red glow of

Nigel's cigarette; she made towards it at once, but she supposed it was the darkness that made her walk so unsteadily.

"Nigel, your mother says you ought to come in;" certainly her voice had a strange indistinctness to-night.

"She has sent a wrong messenger then, I am not coming in at present, thank you."

"That is wrong, and when she says you are ill, too; how fearfully angry you must be with me to-night."

He seemed inclined to make a passionate reply, but checked himself.

"You are—are you not, Nigel?"

"I am more hurt than angry, Barbara."

"Ah, that is worse, well, you need be neither, I have changed my mind about going to London."

"You have, Barbara?" in an incredulous tone.

"Yes, I will go now if you will take me;" then he dropped his cigarette and closed her suddenly in his arms.

"My darling—my own darling!"

"Yes, you may call me that or anything you will, but—" laying her head heavily on his shoulder, "Nigel, I feel almost as though I should die to-night.

"Why what ails you, my little love?"

Oh, such an ill-feeling—such sickness—such deadly weariness, I suppose you are holding me, but

I don't know," then he turned her face towards him in alarm.

"Hush, don't talk, dear, it is a little faintness I suppose, you have been too much on the strain to-day," and then he guided her gently towards the open window, and had her on the couch almost before any one saw them, laying the cloak over her and shielding her carefully from observation.

His mother came hurriedly up, but he put her aside.

"A little giddiness, you may give me a glass of wine if you will, but leave her to me;" and as she obeyed him he sat down in the arm-chair beside her, holding her hand, but perfectly silent, only giving her the wine when it was brought, and settling the pillows to her head, but not permitting Nest to come near or assist him.

"You must lie still, like a good child," he said, when she had taken the wine at his bidding. "I have sent a message to your father, to say that you are not coming home to-night, and the madre is preparing a room for you, so you may just shut your eyes, and make yourself comfortable." Barbara gave a little languid smile of assent; she knew that it was not faintness, but mental anguish that oppressed her and made her giddy; but the rest and quiet did her good; it was a new thing to be so shielded by Nigel, his very remorse was making

him thus tender over her; he sat patiently for more than an hour by her side, scarcely making his presence known; only when Geoffrey was gone, and the room empty a minute, he asked if she thought she could walk upstairs.

"I wish I could carry you," he said, stooping over her; "you are so little and light, that I am sure it would not hurt me to try;" but Barbara shook her head with a faint smile.

"You are certain you are better," he said, still lingering beside her.

"Oh yes, much better," she answered. "You have been so good to me, Nigel," and as he still bent over her, she suddenly put up her two hands round his neck, and kissed him.

It was only an involuntary expression of her gratitude, but she had never ventured on even the slightest caress till then, and Nigel's heart beat almost to suffocation with joyful surprise.

But if he had known? Ah, if he had only known?

CHAPTER XI.

THE DARK ANGEL.

"Spare me the past—for see, she cannot harm you,
She lies so white and cold, wrapped in her shroud,
All, all my own; and trust me, I will hide her
Within my soul, nor speak to her aloud."

Adelaide Anne Proctor.

"Up above the thoughts that know not anguish,
Tender care, sweet love for us below,
Noble pity, free from anxious terror,
Larger love without a touch of woe.

* * * *

"Up above a crowned and happy spirit,
Like an infant in the eternal years,
Who shall grow in love and light for ever
Ordered in his place among his peers."

Very Rev. W. Alexander.

"And when you see fair hair be pitiful."

George Eliot.

Of course Barbara kept her word and went to London, about three weeks after Norman had left Sunningford, and the very next day after that in which Nest had become Lady Hunsden, the Strath carriage conveyed Barbara and her father to the

Durnford station, where they found Nigel and his mother waiting for them in the midst of a formidable array of servants and luggage.

It is an old proverb—and one that Bunyan has among many such sayings—that "Heaven gives nuts to those who have no teeth;" Barbara was soon to discover the truth of this saying when she found herself in the stately mansion in Portman Square.

A year ago, a few months even, and she would have revelled in such gorgeous surroundings—as well as in the purple and fine linen which now appertained to her—when she would have borne herself like a little queen, seeing herself so fêted and caressed. Had ever any little rustic so chivalrous a lover as Nigel? was he not always beside her to minister to her wishes? were there any limits to Lady Strath's condescension? had she not the handsomest apartments allotted to her, apartments which a countess had inhabited, beside the assistance of her ladyship's own maid, and was she not surrounded by everything in which her soul delighted, seeing that in her secret heart she had ever loved the pomp and vanities of this world; and did these things make her one whit the happier, any more than the gilding of his cage pleases the imprisoned lark? No!

It was the fairy story carried out without its

enchantment; day after day Bab saw her little person reflected in the great shining mirrors, her feet buried themselves in carpets as thick and soft as moss; the great bed in which she slept had hangings of purple silk; Bab used to look up and wonder at the painted Cupids, she thought them singular specimens of art; the lurking shadows from the great wardrobe made her tremble and shrink; she used to glide about the grand suite of rooms, among the pillars and statues, like a bright-eyed mouse, in her velvet dress, somehow the dazzling silks and gaily painted muslins never seemed to become her so well as this; Nigel found this out, she used to put it on every evening they spent at home; he would call her his Beatrice and all manner of absurd and impossible names, to which she listened with the greatest gravity; do what he would he could never call the faintest blush to her cheeks, the wild roses had faded with her captivity, and with all his efforts she looked older and more worn every day.

Late hours suited Barbara as little as they do most people; her days and even her nights passed in one whirl of excitement. Nigel was determined that she should see all the London sights; the Straths' carriage rolled from museum to picture galleries, and to all manner of odd out-of-the-way places, quite out of the reckoning of the powdered

footman, to whom the parks and a few squares constituted London; Barbara liked the parks, she and Nigel used to have long rides before luncheon, up and down the deserted Rotten Row; he was getting proud of Bab's horsemanship now. He took her to see the skating on the Serpentine, and Bab thought it a very pretty sight as she walked under the leafless trees, in her new furs; in the evening they went to the theatres or the English Opera, or spent quiet genial hours at the Fords'—Bab preferred anything to the evenings they spent at home; and though the constant effort to appear cheerful and amused was wearing her out, her flagging spirits were less noticeable than in the long *tête-à-têtes* which invariably followed their stately dinner. But whether she went out or stayed at home, there was always the same weight on her. She used to sit listlessly in the shops, thinking of Sunningford and Norman, while Lady Strath turned over all manner of shining fabrics for her trousseau; her indifference was a constant source of complaint; when her taste was questioned she had rarely any choice, except that she showed a provoking preference for browns and greys, and all sorts of Quaker-like tint. She would drum on the counter with her French kid glove, humming weary little airs, when Lady Strath turned angrily away. Nigel used to hover over the wonderful

combination of colours, choosing a blue here, and a sea-green there, and trying all sorts of effects with lace draperies.

"Am I going to wear all these? you will make a harlequin of me," she would say, wrinkling up her brows at him. There it was again, tra-la-la tra-la-la, what a pretty air it was; and there would rise before her the picture of a girl going out to drink tea in her one silk dress—a grey, soft grey—such as he loved, with dainty little ruffles, and a crimson rose as a breast-knot. "Barbara, I think we will go and hear Fechter to-night." Barbara looks up with a start, and shakes herself. She yawns fearfully all the way home under her veil, while Lady Strath chatters about her purchases. Nigel chimes in; it is all blue and rose color over again. A pair of kindly eyes, deep set under rugged brows, haunt her as they drive through the snowy streets. "It is the last day of the old year," says Bab, with a sudden shiver. "I don't think we will go and hear Fechter to-night, Nigel; let us call on Leigh and go to the Eve service instead."

Leigh had a pleasant house in Bayswater; Barbara used to coax Nigel to take her there often. Ruth would receive them with her usual placid cheerfulness, a little shy, perhaps, when Nigel was there, and yet not without a certain pride in showing off the treasures of her new home.

She and Leigh treated Nigel as their benefactor; it was touching to see their gratitude to him; they contrived little banquets and feasted them with all manner of pleasant cates; it was certainly rather strange to see Leigh at the head of his table, with his little maidservant behind him, carving the simple dishes and dispensing boyish jokes; when anything went wrong, he and Ruth exchanged glances of dismay; Ruth used to redden terribly over these little failures; the brightness of her glass, and the mixing of her puddings, were sources of secret pride to her; she presided over her pretty tea-table, filling their cups with fragrant Bohea, with the delight of a Hebe; her beauty and simplicity filling Nigel with astonishment. "What a grand creature; she moves like a goddess," he would say; "there is something almost eloquent in her silence. She gives you a cup of tea with the majesty of a Mrs. Siddons or a Juno, no wonder Leigh half worships her—lucky rogue; but he treats her as a child too; fancy calling a superb being like that to order, because she has forgotten the cream."

"Does Juno pour out tea?" says Bab, with a faint smile; she and Nigel are walking home together in the starlight; by-and-by, it became almost a habit of theirs to spend Sunday evening at Leigh's; Nigel used to play over the grand old airs that he

and Barbara had heard at the Cathedral, or some west-end church that morning, fine old symphonies over which Barbara would dream sadly enough in her corner; fragments of Gounod's Mass, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," Nigel's eyes always got soft and dark as he sang this. Barbara noticed that he was never as restless on Sundays; she used to envy the devout way in which he knelt during the prayers at church, his face always beautiful in its earnestness, and his attention seldom wandering as hers did. He never spoke of his feelings; Barbara never heard a single word from him that showed he thought more about these things than other young men; he was always ready to jest when he came out, perhaps he was even more light-hearted for the brief restraint; and yet there was that in his manner at such times that seemed a rebuke upon her hardness; and there was very little doubt, that in spite of all his faultiness and passion, he realised the grandeur and truth of religion far more than Barbara did, though it must be averred that he failed to carry out many of its precepts.

But, perhaps after all he was more sinned against than sinning; Barbara always thought so.

Things went on pretty tolerably till the beginning of the year, when Nigel caught a slight cold; it was not much of a cold, certainly, but it confined him

to the house; his cough harassed his nights, and the weather was very severe; with his indisposition all his irritability returned, he became more exacting; Barbara was never suffered to be out of his sight, except during her afternoon drives with Lady Strath; there was no more play-going or pleasant evenings at Bayswater, the great drawing-rooms were lighted up brilliantly every evening, now, and Barbara began to shrink with a secret sense of dread from the endlessly recurring tête-à-têtes, knowing as she did, that her gravity was a source of dissatisfaction to him.

The mornings were better, she could read to him, or sing her simple little ballads to please him, or make the writing of home-letters an excuse for leaving her quiet; but in the evening there was no such occupation; Lady Strath would come down splendidly dressed, and then there would be the great solemn dinner, but four or five evenings out of the week, she would leave them alone after coffee was brought in, to go into the Fords' for an hour or two, returning home in time to wish them good-night; Barbara used to pray and beg her not to leave them, but she had a way of putting aside all such requests, when interfering with her own pleasure. Nigel never missed her, he wanted nobody but Barbara now, she would say rather bitterly, but in truth she found their society rather dull.

Barbara found it dull, too; the great rooms blazing with wax-lights and fires—Nigel loved an almost tropical heat—oppressed her like some gaudy prison; she would watch Lady Strath sweep out in her ermine cloak, and go and lean against the window, and look out at the dark square, and the starlight; it put her in mind somehow of Ben, and the pine-woods; poor Ben, how he must miss his little mistress, what would she not give to be back again, with him in her own little den, anywhere where she might be alone, and not answering questions.

"What are you doing there, Babette, don't you know I want to talk to you?" Barbara would sigh as she heard the fretful tone.

"It is all so light, and so hot, and brilliant here, Nigel," she would say; "there is no shade, no relief anywhere; I am only resting my eyes by looking out at the dark square;" but she would drop the curtain, and come away obediently, for all that, for he was beginning to rule her with the same rod of iron with which he ruled his mother.

How Bab sickened of his talk.

It was always the same—always running in the same groove, his plans for the future; she could not understand that such talk was only natural to a lover, she used to sit mute and weary as he mapped out the route they must take in the spring;

his description of the Swiss chalets and Italian palaces, to which he meant to introduce her, were received intelligently, but without any attempt at rapture. He could not awake her enthusiasm for the picture galleries of the Vatican, or the Bridge of Sighs; if she were to inhabit the Doge's Palace at Venice, she would have equally disappointed him by her want of surprise; a few months ago, how differently would she have felt and acted; and now, with all her efforts, she could not listen to his plans with any pretence at cheerfulness: what was the whole world of beauty and art to her now, since Norman had left her?

And there was another reason why the strain told so painfully on her; late hours, constant excitement, and the tear and wear of harassed nerves were telling wonderfully on her fine constitution; deprived of air and sunlight, and with no more exercise than a drive in a close carriage with Lady Strath, all her walks and rides suddenly broken off, no wonder she grew more fatigued and spiritless every day; she was home-sick too, and yearning for her father, and Leigh was kept from her by business, and yet Nigel was always teasing her to show more interest in a plan that would involve an absence of months, and almost angering her with his unreasonable reproaches, always uttered when she could least bear them.

It was easy to see that things would soon come to a climax, but it came sooner than she expected.

One evening when Lady Strath had so left them, and they were sitting together in the great drawing-room, Nigel brought out his collection of photographs, to show her some beautiful Neapolitan views, interlarding his conversation, as usual, with all manner of pleasant castles in the air, which Barbara and he were to inhabit. It happened that Barbara was more downcast than usual, that day; she did not feel well either, and the heat of the room oppressed her, and though she looked at the views, and listened dutifully, her answers were so brief and unsatisfactory, so altogether distrait, that Nigel was half offended.

"What are you thinking about, Barbara?" he asked, in a vexed sort of voice.

It might have been the unexpected suddenness of the question, or that she felt her wandering thoughts convicted her, but she reddened so deeply, and in a way he had never seen her, that face, brow, and even her neck, were in one crimson glow; such a sight as that did not tend to reassure him, especially as instead of answering him, she only bent over another photograph, as though to conceal her embarrassment.

"This will never do!" he said, taking it out of her hands, with one of his gloomy looks. "I

suppose you think I am content to have you sitting beside me, evening after evening, and to know that your thoughts are as far from me as though I were the merest stranger; how many months have we been engaged, Barbara? and I am not a bit nearer to you, than I was at the beginning!"

She hung her head, as though every word were making itself felt.

"You are freezing me with your coldness," he continued, "what have I done, that you should keep me at this distance? Could any lover have been more devoted than I? have you ever framed a wish that I have not sought to gratify, whatever it may cost me? have I not shared every thought and feeling, aye, and every hope with you? what have I done, I say, that you should treat me like this?" and as he spoke, the beauty of his love and anger was so terrible to her, that she hardly knew how to answer.

"Indeed, Nigel, you have been too good to me," she said at length.

"Good! Aye, and how have you repaid me? I begin to think I am a poor spirited creature after all, to put up tamely with such treatment: Barbara," turning on her with a sudden fierce inflexion of voice, "Barbara, did you lie when you told me you would be mine?"

She recoiled from him a step, as though he had struck her. "Oh, Nigel!"

"Hush, I did not mean to frighten you," he returned, his vehement tone softening a little; "I beg your pardon, I forgot myself in my passion, this dark blood of mine will make itself felt sometimes; of course I know that you never pretended to love me, but then I thought how sweet it would be to teach you!"

"I do love you, very very dearly!" she said in a low voice.

"That may be, but then you also love Ben! I think sometimes, his share is almost larger than mine; no, you have never deceived me, I know that, but tell me, Barbara, is there any reason that with all my wooing, you are not won?"

She drooped her head still lower as she stood before him; how was she to answer, could she stain her truth, and tell him there was no such reason.

"What am I think from your silence?" he continued, "Barbara, you must answer me."

"Oh no, I cannot," she replied; "did I not always fear that I should never make you happy, and now it is coming true, and oh, Nigel, I have tried so hard to do my duty."

"There it is again," he returned, angrily, "the very word out of your own mouth convicts you, would there be a question of duty between us if you loved me, would it not come as naturally as your breathing does, you are always promising to be

good to me; do you think I care for such goodness, Barbara?"

"I suppose not," she answered sadly.

"I think it is pitiful stuff that you offer me, not worthy of any reasonable man's acceptance, but I am not a reasonable man, as you have often told me. I have sworn that willingly or unwillingly you shall be my wife, and now I fear my judgment is come upon me."

"What shall I do, oh what shall I do?" she said, full of distress.

"What must we both do? you mean; but Barbara, I will never give you up, you are the very light of my eyes and the desire of my heart in spite of your hardness; tell me if you will, how I am to win you, it has come to this, that I will woo you on your own terms."

"Poor friend, poor Nigel!"

"Poor Ben, you mean, I don't think he ever begged quite so humbly; I say that I must win you, Barbara, I want your heart and your spirit for my own, my very own; and not only this little hand, the thoughts that you think as well as the words that you speak; I cannot fathom your thoughts, they do not belong to me."

"I wish I were dead," she answered, in a voice that was choked by emotion.

"Why do you wish that? You were always

wishing it, I know; I think you are trying me to the utmost. Barbara, I ask you again, and this time I will have an answer; is there any reason why I must fail to make you happy?"

"You will make me happy soon, Nigel."

"Soon; ah, that will not do, I must have my answer now. Then there is some such reason."

She remained silent.

"Is there any defect in me that should make it an impossibility, Barbara?"

"No, a thousand times, no."

"That is well. I don't know quite how I look in your eyes; but Barbara,"—with a sudden thought —"it is not, it cannot be, that you have loved someone else, how could you—but that is impossible."

It was coming out then; oh this was terrible, terrible.

"Nigel," she said, touching him with her trembling fingers, as though they could avert his wrath; "if you have any love, any pity, you would forbear to question me; what is past is over and gone now, over and gone."

"Then you have loved somebody!" he persisted. Alas! her quick blush was sufficient answer; "and you have deceived me after all."

"If I have, it was for your own good, Nigel."

"Tush, to leave me working on blindfold, I

suppose. Who was he? I have a right to know his name, Barbara."

"You have no right, and I will never tell you," she answered, firmly.

"No right?"

"No, none at all, it is all over, as I told you; you must leave the past where it is, the future if you will, belongs to you."

"Do you think I will marry you like this, Barbara?" he said, passionately; "if you do not answer my question, I shall go to your father."

"No, oh no!" she cried, almost beside herself; "go to Daddie; indeed you must do no such thing, Nigel."

"But I will. Have you ever known me go from my word? I am determined to know this thing, Barbara, and from the beginning to the end too; it is not possible, no, the idea is preposterous, it could not have been Norman." Then she buried her face in her hands and gave herself for lost, but her agony was nothing to Nigel's.

"Do you mean that it was Norman then?"

"Oh Nigel, I would never have told you." Then he sat down and there was silence for a long time between them.

"Barbara, come here;" and, as she went to him, she saw that he looked broken-hearted.

"You may as well tell me how it all happened,"

he said, speaking with difficulty; "I suppose it must be true, but I find it hard to believe it."

"There is nothing much to tell, Nigel. I always meant to repose entire confidence in you when we were married."

"When we are," he corrected.

"Yes, when we are, but you see you have forestalled it, and I was keeping it from you for your good; it was only my mother's story over again, Nigel."

His troubled eyes seemed to ask her to go on.

"I don't know how it happened, but at one time I disliked him, he was so hard and so satirical you know, and I fancied that he laughed at me; but after a year or two we began to be friends, and just at the time of your accident I was learning to love him."

"Only then, Barbara?"

"Yes, only then, he was so good to me you know; but what is the use of talking about it? we could never have been married."

"Why not; did he not love you?"

"I suppose he did, but it was a very hard and cold sort of love. I know at one time that he meant to make me his wife, and then, when he got poor, everything changed with him."

"Do you mean when the Spanish mines broke?"

"Yes; just before he went away we had a walk

together and he told me he should never marry. There was anger in his voice as he told me that, as though he found his lot bitter to him."

"But did he give no reason for this sudden change? I don't understand it; such fickleness is not like Norman, it could not have all been because he was poor."

Then she became silent again.

"Try to remember what he said, Barbara. Did he give you no clue to his conduct?"

"I don't know whether I ought to repeat it," she said hesitatingly; "he did say something about a promise that was obliging him to go away—he gave it as a reason for his not marrying."

"A promise?"

"I think it must have been a vow, but I am not sure. I forget whether he said it was a secret; he gave me the idea that it was some atonement. I know it was to make somebody happy whom he had known as a boy,—what is the matter, Nigel? oh what have I said?" she continued in infinite distress, for Nigel had started violently now, and his face was almost like death.

"Dear Nie, you must not be so unhappy, it is all past now."

"Past is it! Fool that I was never to suspect this! I see it now, I see it all clearly now—of course my mother told him."

"What do you mean?" she asked timidly; but he went on without heeding her.

"No wonder his manner was so changed to me, poor Norman; no wonder he treated all my offers of help as though they were so many insults; how could she, how could she goad him to such a sacrifice?"

"What sacrifice, Nigel?—you are terrifying me.'

"Am I?" he said with a smile that touched her more than anything, it was so sweet and sad; "nay, I did not mean to frighten you. Come nearer to me, Barbara, my passion has burnt itself out now; feel how my heart is beating, thumping rather. Sometimes I think it would have been wrong for me to marry; I have a fancy, do you know, that I shall die young."

"Oh God forbid, Nigel!"

"How earnestly you speak, why you were wishing to die yourself, a few minutes ago, and now you would have me think that my life was of value in your eyes."

"And is it not? Oh, Nigel, how can you be so cruel?"

"Nay, I am happy to hear it, my beloved. How worn and tired you look; lay down that pretty brown head on my arm. You have not often suffered me to hold you like this, but to-night I would have it so."

She put up her face and kissed him, as she had done once before.

"Oh! that was sweet! Dear, I cannot bear to think how I have made you suffer. I tempted you to sacrifice yourself in your sorrow, and then quarrelled with the little you gave me. I did not think it was in your nature to be so patient as you have been with me."

"It is you who were always noble, Nigel."

"No, oh no; but mine was the error of love. I did not know that you were not to be won, Barbara; you ought to have come and told me all this at the first, dear child."

"I could not—I could not," she sighed.

"Well, perhaps not. Norman had left you in such ignorance you see, and you would have thought that I would not have accepted your sacrifice. Oh, when I think of what these months must have been to you, I am ready to cry shame upon myself."

"Oh, we shall be happier now, Nigel."

"Shall we, dear?"

"Yes. I am so glad that you know all, it has been such a weight on me, and now you will know that I have tried so hard to do my duty—you must not let all this make you unhappy, Nie; you must remember how it was with my pretty young mother, but in the end she came to love Daddie."

"Do you mean to try and love me then, Barbara?"

"Oh, do I not? And you are so kind to me that it ought not to be so hard. I think I shall be able to talk to you better than I have ever done yet."

"I hope so, darling, you were always fond of your old St. Ronans; some day, when you look back on this conversation, it will make you very happy to remember how I loved you, and how you were perfect in my eyes; I am afraid I have made you an idol, Barbara."

She smiled up in his face without answering.

"You must never reproach yourself whatever happens, it was only I that was to blame, always remember that; you are only my Darling who has made me happy."

"Who will try to do so; why do you sigh, Nigel? Indeed, indeed, I mean to be a faithful wife to you."

Oh, with his broken heart how was he to answer her?

"It is getting late now," he said, loosing her from his arms; "why has my mother not returned, I wonder. Come, you must take your weary little face upstairs, Barbara; good-night—God bless you my darling."

But for the first time in her life, she almost clung to him.

"I cannot bear to leave you somehow; are you

sure you have forgiven me, Nigel? You have never wished me good-night so solemnly before."

"Have I not? I don't think I ever loved you quite so much as I do to-night; may all good angels guard you my dear one." He caught her to his heart as he spoke, and kissed the face and the little hands passionately, and then blessed her again and let her go; but as Barbara dragged her way wearily up the great staircase, she turned round and saw him at the foot still watching her.

Bab has a dim fancy among many other such thoughts, that one day as she climbs up the golden stairs—the ladder of stars, as she will have it—she shall see him waiting for her at the top, with her guardian angel beside him, with just the same sweet solemn smile upon his face, only without its sadness, and so, led between them, shall come "to the great vision of the Face of Christ."

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The stillness of night crept over the stately house in Portman Square, and then the faint chill dawn of a winter's morning; the drowsy servants crept down one by one and went about their work unwillingly, talking under their breaths of this or that thing that was to happen, never dreaming what the day had in store for them any more than Barbara had, sleeping under her canopy of painted cupids.

At the usual hour the old butler went up to his master's room, and put back the heavy curtains that draped the chamber in gloom; he laid out the silver apparatus on the dressing-table with his usual elaborate care, and then stepped up to the bed, wondering greatly that no sleepy voice had summoned him. Do you know what he saw? * * *

Stretched on the coverlet, fully dressed, as though he had thrown himself down in pain, his face half hidden in the pillows, and the fair hair clinging damply round his temples, lay the young master; something in the attitude, in the profound stillness, smote the servant with vague fear, and he turned the face tenderly in his hands to the light. And there, with the sweet solemn smile still curving his lips, with his great beautiful eyes fixed and lustreless, was the lifeless form of the young heir—the soul of Nigel Strath was with its God.

One swift brief agony and it was over; in the stillness of the night, when other happy sleepers were dreaming of the coming day, the Dark Angel, who had so often threatened the first-born of the house, now crossed the threshold with his unsheathed sword in his hand; alone he had met him face to face—alone he had grappled with him, measuring his strength against one whose name was "Secret;" there he bowed, he fell down, calling upon his God to save him. Hush, tread softly, this

is holy ground; for so "He giveth His beloved sleep."

Oh, draw we a veil over what followed. Why need we describe the miserable mother raving like a mad woman amid the doctors and servants, trying remedies that were alike fruitless and distressing. Rather would I tell how a few hours later, a little figure, dry-eyed and strangely still, crept to his side and nestled in the dead breast. Ah, Barbara, unhappy child, what recks it to him, though you draw those heavy arms about your neck, and cover those cold hands with passionate kisses; never more shall his love, strong as death, enfold you—never more shall he call you his darling, his darling; never more shall his passion and his anger terrify you with their weird beauty; he cannot hear the tearless sobs with which you call upon his name; he cannot hear you tell him that you loved him, though not as he might wish. Ah! better to slip to your knees and take the dead hand solemnly between your own as you are now doing, and pray that your God may make you worthy to meet him in a land where "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain;" where earthly passions shall be smoothed away, and the dross of human love refined, and he and you and all that have so loved and suffered, shall be "even as the angels."

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNFINISHED LETTER.

"In my ears
The sound of waters. There he stood, my King!

"I felt him rather than beheld him. If
I rose, as if he were my King indeed,
And then sat down in trouble at myself
And struggling for my woman's empery.
'Tis pitiful: but women are so made—
We'll die for you perhaps—'tis probable:
But we'll not spare you an inch of our full length."

Aurora Leigh.

I DO not mean to linger over this sad portion of Barbara's history, for the time is now drawing near, dear reader, when we must part; there are sorrows, remorses, which, as I have told you before, are best understood by sacred silences, a few words may sometimes condense the sufferings of years.

For in the multitude of words there is weakness, and vain repetitions become expressionless, and fall short of their due meaning. What though the culminating point of Barbara Heathcote's Trial is reached, and she looks out over a barren waste of

years, dejected and objectless, regarding herself as one of God's maidens, sent out into the field of life to glean after the reapers the few joys that they let fall, an ear or two of ripened comfort, which she may, if she will, bind up with her scanty sheaf.

For a few long miserable days Barbara crept about the darkened house like a guilty thing; the burden of her remorse was such that she almost believed herself to be Nigel's murderer. Lady Strath kept herself closely shut up in her own apartments, refusing to be comforted; she and Barbara had only met once, but the interview had been so bitter that neither could have borne to have it repeated; Lady Strath had reproached her with her coldness and want of love to Nigel, and almost hinted that greater affection might have prolonged his life; and the poor girl had listened to her, as dumb as though the words convicted her with awful truth, and then had crept silently away; but half the night afterwards they could hear her pacing her room like a wild thing, and sobbing as though her heart would break. Her mind was on such a morbid strain that, if relief had not come, nervous fever must have been the consequence; but at the end of a week comfort came to her in an unexpected form.

The old physician who had warned Nigel about his health, came to see Lady Strath in her trouble,

and was full of compassion for the desolate little creature whom he met wandering aimlessly about the rooms; his kind words inspired Barbara with gratitude, and on the impulse of the moment she opened her heart to him, and showed him all her grief.

It was the wisest thing she could have done, and it saved her.

"My dear," he said, taking her hand in his fatherly way, "I am glad you have told me this, for I may be able to help you; indeed, you must not reproach yourself so severely; the poor boy died, we may truly say, by the visitation of God; but it was not unexpected."

"Not unexpected, Dr. Jordan?"

"No, Nigel and his mother too, were fully aware of his precarious state; I don't wish to blame him, poor lad, but if he had come to me, I should have warned him against marrying; indeed, I said as much to him when he was last in London, but I suppose he did not understand me. Amongst other things, he had an aggravated form of heart disease; he might have died any time for the last ten years."

"Yes, but I hastened his death, Lady Strath said that I did."

"Did she say so? that was very wrong; but you must not let her words trouble you; it was true that any form of excitement accelerated the action of the heart fearfully; but I have always found with

Nigel, that any pleasurable excitement was attended with exactly the same result; indeed, from the post-mortem examination, I am inclined to think that under the most favorable circumstances you could not have kept him with you for more than a year or two; Dr. Heathcote could hardly have been aware of this in permitting you to marry him; you see none of the doctors at Sunningford examined him, and that sort of complaint is very deceptive."

"If I could only bring myself to believe this," sighed Barbara; "but oh, that unhappy conversation."

"I don't think it was so much the talk," returned the doctor, "as the attempt to write that letter in his agitated state, that brought on the fatal attack."

"What letter?" interrupted Barbara, very much startled.

"Why, have they not told you there was a fragment of one, a mere beginning, evidently intended for his cousin Dr. Strath? it was lying by his Bible, poor boy, and it is rather a strange coincidence that he should have scored the words, in the open page, so deeply with his pen, 'I write unto you young men, because ye have overcome the Wicked one.' It seems to imply some conflict of mind which took place, perhaps before he commenced that letter; nay, my child, you must not take it to heart like this."

"Oh, what shall I do?" she sobbed; "he was writing to Norman then; oh, I know, I can guess what he said. Dr. Jordan, I must see that letter; you must beg Lady Strath to let me have it, things are so between us that I cannot speak to her myself, and, indeed, it has nothing to do with her."

Well, I will do what I can for you," he answered, as he rose, and then he went up to Lady Strath; it was some time before he returned, looking very grave, but with the letter in his hand; he had evidently had some difficulty in obtaining it, but all he said was, that Lady Strath wished to have nothing to do with sending it; it was in Barbara's hand now, and she might act as she pleased. Barbara thanked him, and then withdrew silently to her room; but her tears fell so fast that it was some time before she could decipher clearly the blurred trembling hand in which it was written; it was as Dr. Jordan had told her a mere fragment; but how pregnant with generous meaning to her; now, indeed, she understood the scored text; truly strength was made perfect in weakness, his hour of conflict was also his hour of victory.

"My dear Norman," it began, but the few lines were torn and ragged, and blistered with tears before Norman saw them.

"My dear Norman,

"I have heard all to-night; Barbara loves you, and you have deserted her like a madman, a generous madman too; and now I am going to tell you what we must all do, unless,—there my pain is coming on—unless my heart breaks before I can get it written; for I am ill, Norman, and there is a strange foreboding on me to-night, that I shall never see my darling again.

"But, indeed, you have cruelly wronged her, if you believe her fickle, for she dearly loves you, and you only; I believe she was so truly miserable when you left her that she hardly cared what became of her; and then it was, that I got her to engage herself to me, by promising to befriend her father in his trouble; she is sacrificing herself for the old man's sake, and it is I who tempted her to it.

"Norman, you have behaved like a madman, God bless you; but if I can undo my sin and help you, I will; though the doing of it may kill me; oh this pain! where am I? there, you shall have her, as surely as she is mine, I will give her to you, if you will make her happy, but——"

Ah then it was that he laid down his pen, and that he called upon his God to help him, for the hour of his mortal anguish was come, and he must stretch himself upon his bed, while the Dark Presence was drawing him slowly home.

Barbara showed no one that letter; and neither did she send it to Norman.

And it was the second great mistake of Barbara's life.

It never entered into her bewildered brains that she was detaining Norman's property unjustifiably; if she had questioned her own conscience at all, which she did from time to time, she assured herself that it was her right so to detain it, seeing that it was a confidence between her and Nigel; if she sent it or permitted her father to send it, would it not oblige Norman to marry her whether he would or not, and had he not told her in plain terms that he could never marry; the very thought that he should be brought to know of her hopeless love set her pulses tingling with a sense of shame; she could not understand Nigel's vague sentences with regard to Norman himself; left so completely in the dark as to his true reasons for leaving her, it was hardly possible that she could grope her way to the light, and though perhaps we may blame her conduct, we can at least understand it, seeing that such proud natures as Barbara's are given to hide all such maidenly secrets even to their own bitter cost.

At the end of the dismal week Dr. Heathcote came and fetched her away; and so Barbara went back to Sunningford. But she was so truly broken, that it might be said that all places were

alike to her; for some time her father's tenderness, and the watchful care with which Hester and Connie tended her, failed to rouse her from the state of listless misery in which she had sunk; and her thin face and piteous dark eyes, as she sat silently among them, or wandered dejectedly in the old garden with only Ben as her companion, filled them with grave concern for her health; but as Dr. Heathcote told them, it was only the reaction from months of excitement and overwrought feeling, and when the summer came his Bab would recover her old looks again.

But indeed, he was ignorant of the full extent of the mischief or the sick loneliness that came on her, when she sat by Nigel's grave, or wandered in the pine woods, or through the deserted lawns of St. Ronans; the summer came, but she still drooped and pined; and then the autumn, and it was not till the first sad anniversary of Nigel's death was passed, that she began to take up her employments with anything like her old zest, and then not till after a long visit she had spent at Hunsden. From the first she had clung to Nest, as her greatest comfort; Dr. Heathcote encouraged their intimacy, thinking it good for Barbara. Hunsden Park was a very cheerful place now under its little mistress, and though Nest truly mourned for her brother, she was too devoted a wife to let her own personal

sadness interfere with her husband's happiness; and it was she who first induced Barbara to take up her painting again, and make it the solace of her disappointed life.

It was wonderful what good effects resulted from this sensible advice; Barbara first grew busy, then interested, then she began to begrudge the time she had wasted in brooding over her troubles; she took her walks for refreshment now, and not to indulge her grief unobserved; she slept better, the color came back to her face, her gravity grew less intense as the winter went on; her work prospered, success was to be dreamed of; by-and-by came the assurance of reality, when she was an acknowledged artist Her picture was very much admired, before Geoffrey bought it; it was a simple subject, "Children nutting in the Woods;" but there was a very favorable mention of it in the London papers. Barbara laughed her old merry laugh when her father read it out to her.

After that she might be said to have lived for her art; picture after picture was designed and painted. She began to be known for a very fair artist; her groups of children were especially admired. Sunningford grew proud of its rising genius; the second Miss Heathcote was pointed out as one of the lions of the place to curious strangers; and it was owned now on all sides, that poor Nigel Strath had some foundation for his choice.

Barbara used to smile one of her shrewd smiles when these comments reached her; she was growing more old-fashioned than ever now; in her quiet staidness, it did not matter to her, she said, what people thought of her, so long as she painted good pictures, and did her duty, she was glad of the money, for her father's sake, and that was all. Hester used to rebuke her fondly for her indifference; she was very proud of Barbara now. "It is wrong to have no interest of your own in life," she would say, "though you are an artist, and thought so much of, I don't believe you are half so happy as I am with my children and old women."

"I don't believe that I am, Essie," the girl would answer, sadly; and she would droop her head over her easel. Every Sunday she would go and lay fresh garlands on Nigel's grave; when she sat there in the long summer evenings, she would wonder what Norman was doing, and whether, when they were old, they would meet again. "I don't think Norman will look well as an old man," she would say to herself; "his face will harden, and get more severe, I expect. How splendidly he is getting on. He told me he was assured of success;" and she would take out Mrs. Strath's last letter, and read it.

Mrs. Strath was not a good correspondent, her letters were "few and far between;" Barbara's were not more frequent, a sort of barrier had grown

up between those two, which, at that distance, was not very easy to break down. Mrs. Strath told Barbara about the wonderful cure that was making Norman's fortune—Norman called it a fluke, in his satirical way—but it was true that people were flocking to him from all sides. In his few letters to the doctor he sent brief messages to his three daughters, but never, by any chance, mentioned Barbara alone, except in his mother's note of condolence after his cousin's death.

And all this time Nigel's unfinished letter was hidden away among Barbara's precious things.

Three years are over and gone—three whole years—and again the winter snows have heaped themselves about the old fir trees and lie like a white mantle over the long lawn at Heathcote House.

It has been rather an eventful Christmas—for another bonnie boy has made his appearance in the snug little house at Bayswater—not Bab's boy, however; this one is decreed by the young parents to be Hester's by right, but Hester has been obliged to stand proxy, for grand preparations have been going on for a long time at Heathcote House, and that very week Connie was to be married to her faithful Sydney. It was a very pretty sight for a winter's wedding, and Connie made a winsome bride; Bab did not look her best, she had a worried

anxious expression that made her face look old and worn under her smart bridesmaid's bonnet; Hester was beautiful by comparison, her eyes so full of love for the child-sister she was going to lose; the fuss and agitation did not seem to fret her as they did Bab, poor Bab, whose unmade trousseau had lain under lock and key in Hester's room for three years now.

It was a great relief when the house was quiet, and they had fallen into their old ways again; both missed Connie sorely, but Hester's loss was by far the greatest; yet, with that sweet unselfishness which came upon her with her maturer years, she insisted on Barbara's fulfilling her long talked of visit to Leigh's, not listening to her oft-repeated protests that they were too dull for her to leave them.

Things were settled when Leigh came down to fetch her himself, and she consented with a tolerable grace to accompany him back; these visits to Bayswater, were, as Hester knew, her greatest refreshments; she was never happier than when sitting in their pretty drawing-room, nursing Leigh's boy. It was, therefore, with no small degree of pleasure that she went about her hurried preparations. Leigh's society always cheered her, and during their long journey, she even condescended to discuss the details of the wedding,

though she very gladly left off to question him about the new baby. "Was he at all like his brother—baby Leigh—and was Ruth disappointed that it was not a girl?" No, Ruth was not disappointed, she was too sensible for such stuff; and if Barbara wanted to make friends with such a bald, red-faced little piece of humanity she might, but, as to being like his elder brother, Leigh considered it an insult to his first-born. Ruth had dared to suggest a likeness to himself, and here Leigh smoothed over his handsome face and budding moustache, as though he felt himself injured; and then both laughed and were in high good spirits by the time the train had steamed into the station.

There was the usual fuss over the luggage—rather augmented this time by Leigh insisting on kidnapping an old lady's trunk on the pretext it was Barbara's; but it was all over at last, and they were driving through the brilliant streets.

"I have not asked any of your artist friends to meet you, Bab, not even Scolie; I thought you would rather be cosy with Ruth and myself to-night, and Ruth is wild to hear about the wedding."

"I am sure that I am very glad that you have not," answered Bab, "I am quite sick of fuss, and dinners, and company is not very pleasant after a long journey; and then there are my boys, you

know. Oh Gyp, it will be so nice to see baby Leigh again."

"Baby Gyp, I suppose you mean——hallo! what are you after, cabby! the third house on the right hand side, I told you, stoopid!"

"Yah!" roared out "Stoopid," and then they were brought up very smartly into half an inch contact with a lamp post.

"That's the house; come, quick, open the door," and Leigh jumped out, dragging Barbara after him, and ringing with a peal that informed the whole terrace that Leigh Heathcote, Esq. was come home.

"Where is mammie Ruth?" was his first question, and then Ruth appeared on the stairs, looking larger and fairer than ever, with a very small boy by her side, in a wide sash, and his head running all over with bright yellow curls.

"Dear Leigh, have you brought Barbara? Oh, there she is," as the little figure darted out of the dark hall; and, as the two women embraced warmly, she whispered, "Oh, Barbara, I cannot tell you how glad I am you have come this evening."

"To see Master Rolf, I suppose?" said Bab, with another hug, "how refreshing it is to see your dear beautiful face again; there, take me up in the nursery now, and don't stand looking after Leigh, he always pokes about in the dining-room first thing."

"Yes, dear, I am coming; you must be starved with cold, too. Baby, take Auntie up into mother's room, I'll be with you directly."

"Hallo, Rue, who are you expecting to dinner? Janet has laid four covers," and Leigh appeared at the door with an air of disgust; "that's nonsense, Boy can't come in till dessert."

Ruth flushed scarlet, "It is all right, Janet," she said, waving off the little handmaid, "if you will come up in your dressing-room, Leigh, I will tell you all about it; I am only expecting an old friend that we shall all be glad to see. Barbara, please take Boy up to the nursery."

"Mr. Noah's here," cried Boy, as he ascended the stairs, his sash floating splendidly behind him. "Boy has broken the lion and the cock-a-doodle-doo. Will Mr. Noah cry?"

"No," says Bab, "who wants Mr. Noah—bless you!" and she accelerates matters by snatching him up and smothering him with kisses. Ruth and Leigh find them playing at peep-bo between the banisters, and Ruth again makes that remark about being starved with cold. "It is all baby Leigh's fault," cries Bab, and then she makes her muff into a pussy, and gives it him to carry up-stairs; "take the poor thing right up into the nursery, mind," Boy promises, puts his right leg on the stair, and makes as though he would clamber

up, he does get up the first flight, and then he pauses fondly to caress his pussy. "Go up-stairs, sir!" says Bab, stamping her foot, the boy shakes his curls, looking lovely and just like his mother, and then bolts into a half-opened door, which happens to be the drawing-room; Bab scuttles in after him, dragging her boa after her; a gentleman who is reading a newspaper by the fire, rises in some astonishment and looks at them.

"I beg your pardon," says poor Bab, in great confusion. "Boy would——" and then she looks up with a quick exclamation, "Norman! oh Norman!" and feels all at once as though she would sink into the floor at the sound of her own agitated voice.

"Yes, it is I, Barbara. I suppose you did not expect to see me here to-night?" and he shakes hands with her gravely, and then they both sit down; at least, Dr. Strath places the chair for her, into which she sinks helplessly, and then he stirs the fire with unnecessary vigor, warming his hands over it before he takes possession of the opposite seat.

"It is very cold this evening," he observes at last, but still looking at the fire.

"Very cold, indeed," assents Barbara, and then to her relief Boy clambers up into her lap. She is sure that her face is absolutely white, and that her lips are trembling; now as she speaks, she rests them against the tight yellow curls. Baby Leigh

never got so many kisses in his life as Bab now bestows upon him, as she arranges and re-arranges that prodigious sash of his with her cold fingers. She does not dare to look at the opposite chair; of all the strange dreams that had ever come to her, this is the strangest.

Dr. Strath looks much as usual, except that he takes so strong an interest in the fire as he talks or answers Barbara; every now and then he administers meditative pokes, bringing little jets of colored gas out of a soft shining mass of coal; the fire pictures are evidently pleasanter to him than the little figure wrapped in furs opposite, with the smiling boy on her lap.

"It is very cold," he remarks again; "and then you have just come off a journey. I know I was half frozen as I came up from Liverpool."

"When did you arrive in England, Norman?" Boy has made a grenadier of himself by crowning his head with Bab's muff. It is a most convenient shield for her question.

"Oh, I only arrived yesterday. I came up to London by the night mail not to lose any time, and as soon as I had breakfasted, walked on here in the hope of seeing Leigh, but he was at Sunningford."

"Yes; he very kindly came down to fetch me."

"So Mrs. Leigh said, and then she asked me to come this evening to dinner. I have come over to

England on most unexpected business, and I want to bespeak Leigh Heathcote's assistance if I can."

"On business?"

"Yes; an old relative of my mother, whose name I hardly remember ever hearing, has died and left us rather a pretty little piece of property; quite sufficient, that is, to make it worth my while to come over to England and rescue it from a shark of a lawyer who threatens to devour it bodily. I want to coin it into money if I can, and that's how it is you find me here to-night."

"Indeed," says Bab, whose nervousness returns on the grenadier cap being suddenly removed; "I wonder what has become of Ruth. How was your mother when you left her, Norman?"

"My mother, oh, she was very well; only she wanted to come with me. She does not like New York at all; I am afraid she is growing terribly home-sick."

"That is a pity," returned Bab, rather inaudibly; Boy has jumped off her lap, leaving her exposed at all points, and there was no knowing to what state of desperation she would have been reduced, if Ruth had not made her appearance, full of apologies for leaving them so long. Bab crept under her wing without a word, still dragging her boa after her and never looking at Norman, as he stood opening the door for them; she followed Ruth upstairs still with

the same dumbness till they came to the nursery, or mother's room as it was called, making no sort of sign whatever, when the great fair boy was laid in her arms.

"Is he not a beauty," said the young mother rapturously; "Nurse says he is the finest baby she has ever seen."

"Yes he is very fine," responded Bab, languidly; "he is like you, Ruth; are their hands always so crumpled?" and she stood looking helpless under the mass of white draperies.

Ruth laughed her musical laugh.

"Come to me, my beautiful; auntie Bab has no eyes for you to-night," and she received her boy back with the soft coos peculiar to doves and mothers, inexplicable baby language, plaintive duets and solos, than which there is none sweeter on earth; while Bab walked off by herself into the bright little room made snug and warm with fire-light and candles.

Ruth had not wasted her time, Bab's trunk was partially unpacked, and her pretty dinner-dress laid out on the bed; Bab's first action was to throw it aside, and then she took out a grey silk—not the old grey silk, but another just like it, and put it on, sighing as though her heart would break; and indeed she hardly knew what the tight hard pain that she felt meant, and if such tumult signified

happiness or regret, or whether joy at seeing him predominated over the still remembered anguish of their parting, when he had spoken to her so coldly; well, and was he not cold still, had he even asked how she was, had he looked at her, was not his face sterner than ever, as he sat opposite to her rubbing his hands in his old way, and speaking about the weather?

Poor Bab, and for all that she would have liked to appear her best to-night; but do what she would, she could not bring a vestige of color to her face, which looked all of a sudden so worn and jaded; she stood before the glass getting graver and sadder every minute, trying pitiful little effects with her rose-colored ribbons, before she laid them aside with another sigh, and went downstairs looking like a grey wraith of herself, and with her forehead contracted nervously. She did not make her appearance till the last moment, and then only when she knew that they were waiting dinner, and how she dreaded the next hour, and Leigh's jokes and personal remarks, only she herself knew.

But it passed off better than she expected, though when she came to recal the evening she could hardly remember a single sentence she uttered; but Leigh talked glibly and Dr. Strath answered him; if he wanted to shield Barbara from notice, he could not have done better, for he hardly addressed her once,

and never looked at her, except when she was otherwise occupied; and yet there was not a line or expression on the weary little face that was lost on him.

The gentlemen talked, and Ruth and Barbara exchanged little sentences, about the children; Boy came down to dessert, and sat by his aunt, who immediately concentrated her attention on him, till it was time for the ladies to retire; when they got upstairs she made an excuse to Ruth, and threw herself down in a chair in the darkest end of the inner drawing room; and tried by every effort in her power to still her throbbing pulse, and bring her thoughts into some order; "what is he to me, and what am I to him?" she kept saying to herself, "why cannot I look at him, and why do the senseless words trip up each other on my tongue. I will talk to him when he comes upstairs; it is childish, nay, worse, it is absolutely foolish, and he is as cool and collected as though he saw me yesterday, only more indifferent, only, Heaven help me, a hundred times more indifferent than he ever was before."

So she thought, raging inwardly against herself; Ruth forbore to disturb her, thinking she was tired, or perhaps guessing at the truth,—for Ruth always had a feeling that Dr. Strath was Barbara's real choice—Bab heard her telling Leigh when he came up, that his sister was very weary; it might have

been their consideration then, that made them gather round the fire, leaving her in her dark corner in the inner drawing room; perhaps Dr. Strath could not distinguish the grey dress amidst the dimness; anyhow, they were all three in a cosy circle on the hearth rug, and Dr. Strath was making them merry with Yankee anecdotes; of course, it was her own fault, but it made her feel terribly lonely; she could no more have come into their midst, and taken the chair by his side, than she could have flown; she could only sit motionless, hoping that he would not misunderstand her strange behaviour, and feeling as though, with all her pain, it was joy to be hearing his voice again.

It was lulling her into a reverie when coffee was brought in, and Leigh said something about calling Barbara, and wondering what she was doing with herself.

"If you will allow me, I will take her a cup, she is in the inner room," returned Norman. He had seen her all the time then—what a goose he must think her; and Bab struggled up in her arm chair, and pushed back her hair from her face with a troubled expression; but it was too late to escape his attention, for he was coming in now, not groping about in the dusky light as though the room was strange to him, but walking straight up to her.

"I have brought you your coffee, Barbara," and

then he sat down silently beside her till she had finished it.

"I am afraid you are tired," he observed, presently, as she gave up the empty cup to him, with a muttered thanks.

"Very tired—oh, very tired," was poor Bab's answer.

"I thought so, that is why I did not talk to you to-night. If I were you, I would retire early; why should you not go now, your sister will excuse you; a good sleep will set you right after your journey, and I will come and see you to-morrow."

"See me?" Barbara could hardly believe her ears; her tone of surprise made him laugh.

"Yes; why should I not. I want to hear all the Sunningford news, and about your father and Connie; and then I have to seek a little information at your hands. I believe there is a matter of property belonging to me at Heathcote House—a mere trifle, I know—but still mine by right."

"Property of yours, Norman?"

"Yes, certainly; there, we will not talk about it to-night, it may raise some vexed question. I will come and see you to-morrow afternoon. I am such an old friend, that your sister, Mrs. Leigh, will understand."

"Of course she will understand; but, Norman——"

"No—no buts to-night," he returned, good-humoredly; "we will leave them all for to-morrow. You are not looking well, Barbara, you are too thin; good-night, my child, good-night."

It might have been the kindly uttered my child, the pleasant shake of the hand, or the thought that she should see him to-morrow, that made Barbara's heart beat so joyfully; and it was a long time before she could reason herself into quiet again, by the assurance which, alas! she grew to believe as she repeated it, that never, and under no circumstances whatever could he be Bab's friend again.

CHAPTER XIII.

BAB HAS THE LAST WORD.

"O when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd,
She was a vixen, when she went to school,
And, though she be but little, she is fierce."

Shakespeare.

* * * "Will you leave me here?
So wrong, so proud, so weak, so unconsoled,
So mere a woman! And I love you so,
I love you! * * * *
Could I see his face,
I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
Or did his arms constrain me? * *
That I know not."

Aurora Leigh.

BARBARA'S first waking thoughts were rather more hopeful. Before she opened her eyes she had a sensation that something pleasurable was going to happen; with that returned the recollection that Norman was coming again to-day, and now, as she dressed, she told herself that joy predominated.

For might it not be, that after some sort of sober fashion he could still be her friend, or if not now, perhaps after some years had passed; when

she was a staid old maid, and he grown grey with his many labors, would it not be as well that she should put by even the remembrance that he had ever been more to her. She would forgive that past hardness of his, nay she would consider it as altogether cancelled, by her fault; she had behaved foolishly last night, she would meet him on different grounds; those few kindly words in which he had bidden her good-night, convinced her that he would be willing to meet her advances half-way, and this afternoon she would so look and speak, that he would forget the strange agitation of her manner yesterday.

Roused by these good resolutions, and quite content to anticipate that period of her old maidenism, Bab dressed herself in her sober brown merino, scoffing inwardly at the remembrance of the rose-colored ribbons, and she had quite a struggle with herself not to feel pleased at seeing how well the warm rich color suited her. "If people only knew how to dress in accordance with their age," thought Bab with something of her old complacency, "we should have no ridiculous Miss Vokes's. Miss Vokes must be sixty at least, and wears primrose bonnets and green gloves, and I am only five-and-twenty and dress in brown; Leigh will call me 'the little nun' again, but I can't help it;" and then she went down stairs feeling positively virtuous.

It seems a little thing to relate, but that dress supported her through the day; there is certainly a degree of stability and strength to be attained in dress; you remember what the grand old Vicar of Wakefield said about his daughters on the subject: "A suit of mourning has transferred my coquette into a prude, and a new set of ribbons has given her younger sister more than natural vivacity;" what a wonderful observer of human nature that old vicar must have been. It was just so with Barbara; the brown dress unadorned with ribbons, and her new resolution as to the treatment of Dr. Strath, so fortified her, that she was enabled to pass the long morning quite tranquilly with Ruth and her boys; she was quite affecting in her attentions to baby Leigh. "I want Boy to be very fond of his aunt," she observed quite placidly; "for there's no knowing how much I may have to do with him; I mean to save up all my money for Boy, in case Leigh gets bankrupt—merchants are generally bankrupt, are they not?"

Nay, she even received with tolerable equanimity the news that Ruth had business in the City that afternoon, and must leave Barbara to entertain Dr. Strath by herself. "Be sure you ask him to dinner, dear," she repeated for the fourth time; "Leigh won't like me to be inhospitable to his old friends, and those hotels are so dreary."

"Of course I will ask him to dinner if you wish it," replied Barbara, coolly, "and you need not make any excuse about leaving me alone, for we are such old friends you know, and I am to tell him all the Sunningford news." And then she established herself in the warm sunny little drawing-room, and began to knit a pair of socks for Boy; she felt a little less brave when she heard the bell ring, and dropped some stitches from her hand suddenly trembling; perhaps picking them up made her face burn, she was certainly too busy to look up at Dr. Strath's entrance, and gave him her hand and her knitting-needles together, in a confusion quite unworthy of her brown dress, all the more that Dr. Strath took no sort of notice of the fire to-day, but looked straight at her with a full understanding that she was flurried.

"I am glad to find you alone this afternoon," he said, dragging the opposite chair farther on the hearth, most unnecessarily as Bab thought, till she remembered that they had a right now, to coze soberly over the fire. "The little maid told me her mistress was out, and I was rather relieved, as I thought I would speak to you on a painful subject which I am anxious to get settled."

"Do you mean about that property?" asked Barbara, wrinkling her brow terribly over her knitting.

"Yes, that and some other things which we will

come to directly. Barbara, do you know that poor Lady Strath is dead!"

Barbara laid down her knitting, and turned paler than he had yet seen her.

"Oh Norman!"

"Yes; is it not sad, poor lady. I am afraid that there was no love lost between us, in her life-time; but I think her bitterest enemy would have pardoned her, knowing what she suffered!"

Barbara leaned her head on her hand with a sad questioning look, too shocked to speak.

"She was in New York when I saw her. I am not going to harass you with particulars, Barbara, but it was a most fearful disease of which she died; her sufferings were protracted and intense, and nothing could be done to relieve her. I was called in at the last to consult on the case; and it will always be a comfort to me to remember that I was able to do more than the others to alleviate her last hours."

"Oh Norman! were you with her when she died?"

"Yes, poor thing, and I am thankful to say, that there was something like peace at the end; she asked my forgiveness, and my mother's too! for the bitterness she had always shown towards us. Just before her last attack she mentioned your name; and asked if I had received Nigel's letter?"

"What letter?" asked Barbara, and then her eyes dropped before the keenness of his look.

"That is what I am going to ask you; now you know what property of mine is in your possession. By-and-by, I shall want to hear your reasons for detaining it these three years, at present I am only anxious that you should at once restore it to me."

"I cannot!" she replied, and her face was suffused with a sudden burning blush.

"What? you do not mean you have destroyed it!" he exclaimed, and his look was very stern.

"No, oh no!" she faltered, but she would have given worlds, that that sin had been hers; "still, all the same, I cannot give it to you."

"Why not?" he enquired still more harshly; "is it at Heathcote House?"

"No, but—"

"Is it here?" he demanded in the peremptory tone she knew so well.

"Yes, it is here! but, indeed, Norman, I cannot give it to you!"

Then he rose from his seat and walked straight up to her.

"Barbara, I insist on having that letter."

She remained silent; she was gathering all her strength to answer him.

"Come, this is childish," he continued; "how

long have you thought it right to detain other people's property, the whole thing is absurd, the letter is mine and you know it. I have a right to insist. Barbara, I am sorry to have to speak so firmly, but I must thank you to fetch it at once."

But she made no sort of movement.

"Barbara, do you hear me? did you ever know me go from my word. I will see that letter."

"You shall never see it, Norman."

"Barbara!"

"I have a right to say so," she went on, growing utterly white in her agitation, "you ought never to have known of its existence; it is not a letter at all, it is a mere fragment, just a word or two, relating to a conversation between us, and in which he has most certainly betrayed my confidence."

"He was the best judge of that, poor fellow."

"No, he was not, I deny it; he was so generous and so ready to act on impulse, he ought never to have written what he did, but it was all his kindness. Now you know why I feel that those few poor little words really belong to me."

"I cannot say that I am at all convinced by your reasoning, Barbara."

"Oh, but you must be. Should I have kept it from you all these years if I had not felt that it was my right so to detain it. Norman, you used to be my friend; for the sake of the dear old days,

never speak to me on this subject again, I ask it as the greatest favor you could ever do me."

He took her hand, not caring to hide from her that her words touched him.

"It will be the only favor that I have ever refused you, dear child."

"But you will not, you will not refuse me, Norman?"

"Most emphatically I must, Barbara; it is no use wasting any more words over it, I say again that I insist on seeing that letter."

Then she sat absolutely dumb before him.

"Come, Barbara, delay cannot save you."

"You will see it?"

"Certainly I will."

"Then take the consequences, for all friendship will be over between us, and I will never willingly see your face again." So saying she walked slowly, almost rigidly, to the centre table, and unlocked a handsome writing case, one of Nigel's many presents to her. Norman followed, and stood watching her as she touched the spring of a secret drawer, where a curl of fair hair lay side by side with the worn paper.

She gave it him without a word, her will, strong as it was, had been almost as nothing compared to his and Nigel's, and then she took up her station at the window that she might not see him read it; she was raging with wounded pride and a sense of

injury, she had quite meant those last bitter words she had said to him; if he could refuse her this she would never forgive him, he had humiliated her so that she would never willingly see his face again; an evil mood was on Barbara, now indeed for the first time it might be said that she was hardening her heart against him. He was standing opposite to her when he began the letter, but as he went on he turned his back, and read it leaning with his elbow on the mantelpiece; there might have been the silence of minutes or hours before he put it down, and came towards her with a flash in his eyes that made her tremble, it was so joyful and triumphant.

"Is this true what he says, Barbara—but of course it is true? and you have hidden from me these three years, these three miserable years that you loved me. Was that kind, was that generous, Barbara?"

"I suppose I must endure your triumph."

"What do you mean by that? nay, I will have you look at me, Barbara; is this a time to turn from me when, for the first time in my life, I dare to tell you openly that I love you."

"It is too late for that now, Dr. Strath." But as she spoke her neck and even her little ears grew scarlet.

"Why is it too late, and why do you call me Dr. Strath? I suppose you mean to be wilful and

punish me for my silence. But what I have suffered, what we have both suffered—" but she made no reply to him.

"I do not think that any man had more to contend with than I; if I railed against my fate it will be forgiven me, all those years that I wooed happiness, and she never came to me. Barbara, when I think of our last meeting, our parting rather, when you came to me in your velvet gown, decked in your lover's gifts, and looking, oh so lovely, to my eyes, I wonder I did not snatch you up in my arms, and refuse to give you up, such longing was upon me, and you thought me so cold and hard."

"Ah, and were you not?" she said still averting her face from him.

"Cold, ask fire if it be cold, for molten fire was in my veins I fully believe; no, you will never know what I suffered, for I have no words in which to tell you; some men can die and make no sign."

Then she turned upon him suddenly.

"If this be true, why did you leave me?" she asked.

"Can you not guess—but no, of course you cannot; did it never strike you that I left England for my cousin's sake?" and, as he saw her inconceivable astonishment, "did not my mother tell you how I was to blame for Nigel's accident, and the morbid effect it had on my mind?"

"Of course she did, but,—"

"Well it seems quixotic and absurd to you, perhaps it does to me now; but there was a time when I would have laid down my life to ensure his happiness, and then I made that vow; by-and-by when I found he was fretting his heart out for you, I learnt there were harder things to lay down than one's life."

"Is this why you went to America?"

"Yes, and because my poverty made me despair of ever marrying you."

"And you deliberately left me to be wooed by Nigel?"

"Of course I did, I could not stay and look on."

"Oh, no wonder he called you a madman when he found it out; did it never occur to you that I might have a voice in the matter?"

"I thought you would be more likely to accept him if I gave him a chance; I did not think my claims were likely to prevail over a younger and handsomer man; if, at any time, I fancied you had a preference for me I thought it was a mere girl's fancy, because you had seen no one else and I was kind to you."

"A mere girl's fancy! oh it was like your man's wisdom; no, don't speak to me, I cannot bear it. Who would have thought that you could have treated me so ungenerously."

"My dearest, hush."

"No, I am not your dearest, not yours or any other man's—you are all alike, all; you could do this grand thing for him, and never dream that your self-sacrifice involved mine also; when you told me you could never marry, did you not render me dumb before you, was I not as helpless and tongue-tied as ever you could wish me to be."

"I wish you—oh Barbara!"

"Well, can girls tell their love. Should I not have interfered with your fine plan for making yourself miserable; you want me to praise this generous deed of yours, but I will not. I told you then, that I did not think you right to leave Sunningford, you were turning your back on those poor people; because they were ignorant, and slandered you, you were hard upon them, and so you went away with a slur on your name, instead of living it down, and that's what I call cowardly, Norman."

"Very cowardly if I had left only for that reason, Barbara."

"Ah, but you were just as mistaken in the other thing. You took the trouble to be kind to me, and win my heart, and then you treated it as a girl's fancy, and left me to Nigel. Do you know now to what you left me, and how he made me do the wrong I hated, for my father's sake?"

"My noble Barbara!"

"No, it was not noble, it was a lie, and I hate lies; I glossed it over to myself by thinking that I loved him a little, and might love him more, and that it could not be wrong to save a father's life; but how all these months I have despised myself, seeing myself so decked out and caressed."

"Hush, dear! it is over now."

"What does it matter that it is over? Norman, what sin there was, lies at your door, for you won my heart, and left me to be tempted as he tempted me, oh my poor St. Ronans."

"Have you finished, dear child?"

"No, I have not finished, and because you have not humiliated me enough, you must make me show you that letter, and now all friendship must be over between us."

"I believe it must, Barbara."

"Of course it must; do you think—" but then she broke down.

His only answer was to open his arms, and fold her tightly to his breast, waiting silently till her pride and passion had sobbed themselves out; for some minutes, poor child, she hardly know what had happened to her, till his few soothing words, and above all, his tender caresses restored her to herself—now indeed that weary little head was at rest on his broad breast, and the hand that she

loved above everything was wiping away the tears from her wet face.

"Oh Norman! I have been very naughty, can you ever forgive me?"

His answer was eloquent enough.

"He has given you to me, Barbara," he said after a little while, "and it shall not be my fault if the gift is not soon in my keeping."

"A poor gift, Norman."

"No, rich, and made priceless by my love. I must not be selfish in my happiness," he continued; "Barbara, I shall never ask you to leave your father—not for always I mean."

They were sitting side by side when he said this, and she stole her little hand into his with a look of mute enquiry.

"I have had so many changes in my life, that one more will not signify. What say you, my dear child, if I take a London practice, so that you may be near your father and Leigh?"

"London is a long way from Sunningford, Norman."

"Yes, but nearer than New York. Perhaps in a few years we may get the doctor to give up work and settle near us. I am sure that with two such sons, such a scheme would be practicable."

Barbara smiled gratefully in his face.

"Yes, but Norman, I could not bear you to incur such loss."

"You mean about selling my practice, oh that is nothing. Lisle will be glad to take it of me, and like my mother, I am growing heartily sick of New York; you see, I have made money enough by that fortunate fluke of mine to establish me in any West-end practice, and without boasting, I think I may say that I am sure of getting on in any place I may choose."

"Dear Norman, I am so glad!"

"Well, so am I for your sake. I want Barbara to queen it grandly as my wife, and in her velvet dress too—poor Nigel. After all, there must be some witchery in your dark eyes, my beauty."

"Oh Norman, I am not that."

"Not that, what are you then, something better, eh?"

"No," with a sweet upward glance, "only Bab."

THE END.

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